

4

SHIMESABA

Illustration by Imaru Adachi

Character Design by booota

HIGEHIRO

After Being Rejected, I Shaved
and Took in a High School Runaway





4

SHIMESABA

Illustration by Imaru Adachi

Character Design by booota

HIGEHIRO

After Being Rejected, I Shaved
and Took in a High School Runaway



HIGEHIRO

*After Being Rejected, I Shaved
and Took in a High School Runaway*

4

SHIMESABA

Illustration by
Imaru Adachi

Character Design by
boota

c o n t e n t s

Chapter 1 Right

Chapter 2 Brother

Chapter 3 Classroom

Chapter 4 Friend

Chapter 5 Rooftop

Chapter 6 Wandering

Chapter 7 Footprints

Chapter 8 Bat

Chapter 9 Family

Chapter 10 Recollection

Chapter 11 Proof

Chapter 12 Best Friend

Chapter 13 Sharing

Chapter 14 High Schooler

Chapter 15 Promise

Afterword

Frontispiece and illustrations

HIGEHIRO

*After Being Rejected, I Shaved
and Took in a High School Runaway*

4

SHIMESABA

ILLUSTRATION BY

Imaru Adachi

CHARACTER DESIGN BY

booota

Copyright



Shimesaba

Translation by Marcus Shauer (MediBang Inc.)

Cover art by Imaru Adachi

Character design by booota

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

HIGE WO SORU, SOSHITE JOSHIKOUSEI WO HIROU Vol. 4

©Shimesaba, booota, Imaru Adachi 2020

First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2023 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: July 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Emma McClain

Designed by Yen Press Design: Madelaine Norman, Wendy Chan

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Shimesaba, author. | booota (Illustrator), illustrator. | Adachi, Imaru, illustrator. | Shauer, Marcus, translator.

Title: Higeiro: after being rejected, I shaved and took in a high school runaway / Shimesaba ; illustration by booota; translation by Marcus Shauer (MediBang Inc.).

Other titles: Hige wo soru, soshite joshikousei wo hirou. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2022.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022017599 | ISBN 9781975344191 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975344214 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975344238 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975344252 (v. 4 ; trade paperback)

Subjects: | LCGFT: Romance fiction. | Humorous fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PL875.5.H55 H54 2022 | DDC 895.63/6 23/eng/20220—dc29

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022017599>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-4425-2 (paperback)

978-1-9753-4426-9 (ebook)

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter 1: Right

Chapter 2: Brother

Chapter 3: Classroom

Chapter 4: Friend

Chapter 5: Rooftop

Chapter 6: Wandering

Chapter 7: Footprints

Chapter 8: Bat

Chapter 9: Family

Chapter 10: Recollection

Chapter 11: Proof

Chapter 12: Best Friend

Chapter 13: Sharing

Chapter 14: High Schooler

Chapter 15: Promise

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Chapter 1 Right

“Always do the right thing.”

My father used to tell me that all the time.

Growing up, I heard those words constantly.

My father had a gentle disposition and followed a completely ordinary path in life. He attended both elementary and middle school in the town where he grew up. Then, after pouring himself into his studies, he passed the entrance exam for a good high school and made it into a prestigious university. After finishing school, he went on to become a civil servant.

When I was a young boy, watching my father take care of my mother and me while working at his government job, I would often think—albeit not very deeply—that the word *right* was made for people like him.

However, as the years went by, I began to lose sight of what it meant to be *right*.

Over and over, someone else’s selfish action would cause an argument, and I’d be painted as the bad guy. Or a classmate who had done nothing wrong would suddenly become a target for bullying by the whole class. When it came to groups of children, there seemed to be no such thing as logic.

Whenever something happened that I didn’t understand, I would ask my father for an explanation. In the back of my mind, I always expected that he’d have a clear answer for me.

And yet, whenever I asked him questions like that, he would always give me the same answer, dashing my childish hopes.

“It’s hard to say.” This was his pet response. “It might look like they did something wrong from your perspective, but they probably have their

reasons.”

His ambiguous answers confused me greatly as a child.

Even when something seemed inconceivably unjust from the victim’s perspective, my father always insisted that the perpetrator *probably had their own reasons*. That may have been true, but it was no justification for siding with those in the wrong—or at least, that was how I always felt.

One day, I lost my patience and gave my father a piece of my mind.

“You’re the one who always told me to do the right thing, so what do you mean, *It’s hard to say?* What’s *right* about that?”

I shouted at my father as we were eating dinner. He sighed and gave me this response:

“Nobody is ever one hundred percent right.”

I can still remember how flabbergasted those words left me.

He continued, speaking deliberately. “There’s something even more important than making the right choice.”

Then, after a long pause, he said something that I have never forgotten, even to this day.

“And that...is doing what you feel is right. You should always be thinking about what’s right... That’s what’s really important.”

*

As I stared at the man in front of me—the one who’d introduced himself as Issa Ogiwara, Sayu’s older brother—I felt cold drops of sweat begin to trickle down my back.

Regardless of whether he was telling the truth, Sayu’s reaction made it obvious the two of them had some sort of connection.

It didn’t seem like he was joking about coming to take Sayu home. After all, he’d managed to track her to my apartment, where she was staying rent-free, and paid us a visit in person.

I was at a loss for words. As my mouth flapped open and shut uselessly, Issa shifted his gaze away from me for a moment and called out to Sayu, who was standing farther back in the apartment.

“You know you can’t keep this up forever. How about you stop acting out and come home?”

Sayu was silent for a few seconds. Then she shook her head. Tears were welling up in her eyes.

“...No,” she said, staring straight at Issa. Then she repeated what she’d said before. “I’m...not ready to go back yet.”

“How long are you going to keep making those childish excuses?!!” Issa shouted past me, half speaking over Sayu and making her flinch.

“You can’t even earn a living yet! That’s hardly running away, is it?! All you did was stop answering my messages and wander all the way here with no plan! Just what were you going to do if some scumbag took you in?!”

“He’s— Mr. Yoshida’s a good guy.”

“Sayu, adults aren’t like children. They wouldn’t think twice about lying and putting on a ‘good guy’ act. He might seem nice, but you have no idea what kind of horrible intentions he—”

“Mr. Yoshida’s not that kind of person!!” Sayu shouted back, cutting Issa off mid-sentence. He looked taken aback. I’d never heard Sayu shout before, and I stared in astonishment.

“Criticize me all you want, but don’t bring Mr. Yoshida into this,” she declared before gasping and looking down at the floor, apparently startled by her own actions.

Issa stood with his mouth agape for a few moments. Then, as if remembering what he’d come to say, he started up again.

“...You’re right. I shouldn’t have spoken ill of someone I hardly know. My apologies.”

He suddenly bowed to me, to which I managed only a vague reply.

“Um... Don’t worry. It’s fine.”

Once he performed this bare minimum of politeness, he promptly turned his gaze back to Sayu and continued.

“Regardless of how you might feel, Sayu, you can’t keep running away from home like this.”

Sayu looked up at her brother uneasily. She seemed to sense something in his words.

He looked her straight in the eye and took his time speaking.

“...Mom’s worried about you, Sayu.”

The moment she heard this, the warmth drained from Sayu’s eyes so obviously, even I could see it. I stole a peek at Issa to find that he, too, looked tense.

“...You’re lying,” Sayu said icily. “Our mother would never worry about me.”

Her expression reminded me of the one she had when she first moved into my apartment. It pained me to look at her.

Issa searched the floor with his eyes, as if carefully selecting his words. Then he cautiously began to speak.

“...At the very least, she’s looking for you. You’re on her mind.”

“Why?” Sayu asked reflexively.

I felt an immense sadness weigh on me at this word.

She’d just heard her own mother was worried about her running away, and her first question was *Why*? It was clear that Sayu’s relationship with her mother was anything but normal.

“Why would Mom want to look for me?”

“Well...”

Issa was obviously unsure how to respond.

It was during the ensuing silence that I finally began to calm down, and it occurred to me that Issa had been standing in the doorway this whole time.

“Um, I hate to interrupt, but...”

Sayu and her brother both looked at me.

“...how about we take this conversation inside?”

Issa pondered on this invitation for a moment.

“...If you insist,” he finally replied.

*

I told Sayu to make some tea, then headed for the balcony with my phone.

Just as I was about to step out, Issa, who was sitting at my table looking uncomfortable, asked, “Who are you calling?”

“Work,” I answered. “If I don’t take the day off, we won’t have enough time for a proper discussion.”

“Oh yes... Of course,” Issa replied, looking embarrassed. “Sorry to trouble you.”

I was beginning to get the impression he wasn’t such a bad guy after all.

I called the office and told them I would be taking a sick day. I was fully expecting them to make a fuss, but the person on the other end simply said, “*You almost never get sick! Be sure to rest up and come back soon!*”

This was the first time I’d lied about being sick since starting my current job, and it was ridiculously easy. It left me with mixed feelings.

Before Sayu came along, I never would have forgiven myself for taking a sick day, but now here I was, easily prioritizing her over my work.

I vaguely recalled something my father used to say.

“*Do what you feel is right.*”

That was all I ever heard growing up, and I was constantly thinking about whether I was doing the *right* thing. I still thought about it now.

A little while ago, I never would have feigned illness under any circumstances. Now, however, there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that dedicating my time to Sayu was the right choice.

Back when I decided to let Sayu stay with me, I had felt differently.

I was certain what I was doing was wrong, but I ignored those feelings and took her in anyway.

However, the more time we spent living together, the less sure I was about what was *right*.

It felt wrong to throw Sayu out without a chance to heal from the wounds of her past. But keeping her at my place indefinitely didn’t seem right to me, either.

I was happy when Sayu finally decided to impose a deadline, though vague, on our time together. But I was also conflicted.

My only question was how I could keep that carefree, natural smile on her face. But the answer eluded me, as if slipping away into a fog.

And now, before I found any of the answers I was looking for, our time together had run out.

Did I still have a chance to help Sayu do what was *right* for her?

That was the only thing I needed to think about.

Chapter 2 Brother

“To begin, I’d like to thank you for looking after Sayu all this time.”

To calm himself down before speaking, Issa took a few sips of the green tea Sayu had brewed. It seemed he wanted to start afresh.

“Oh... It’s fine... There’s no need to thank me.”

“No, I mean it. I came here worried sick over what kind of miserable hovel my sister was living in, but it appears you have a very normal home and that you’ve earned Sayu’s trust.”

His choice of words was a little harsh, but I could tell they stemmed from a true sense of relief. It was clear Issa was worried about Sayu.

Her brother really cares about her, I thought.

From some of the things Sayu had said, I’d gathered that her home situation was less than ideal. But we’d never discussed how bad it actually was.

Finding out that her older brother, at least, was on her side gave me some peace of mind.

“Just to be absolutely certain...”

Issa paused mid-sentence, as if this was difficult for him to say, before looking at me and Sayu in turn and continuing.

“...You two haven’t done anything inappropriate, correct?”

“No,” I answered flatly.

“I already told you that!” Sayu snapped, her cheeks flushing pink.

He’d asked the same question a few minutes earlier, and we’d responded in the exact same way.

But this was an important matter from a family member’s perspective, so it was understandable he’d want to double-check.

There's no way I can tell him what she did before coming to stay with me, I thought.

"I can't even begin to fathom why someone would shelter a high school girl for so long and only ask her to do chores... But I appreciate it immensely."

"Taking advantage of someone like that is out of the question...at least for me."

Issa looked at me for a moment with an indescribable expression before nodding several times.

"If only all adults were like you, Mr. Yoshida..."

I stared at the surface of the table, unsure of how to respond, then casually glanced toward Sayu. It seemed her nerves from earlier had eased, and her expression was somewhat calmer.

After a few moments of silence, Issa began to speak.

"Now then, let's get straight to the point." He and Sayu locked eyes. "Mom told me directly that I was to bring you home."

"...I see." Sayu's expression clouded over. "...But she's not really worried, is she?"

"Well—"

"It's fine. There's no need to walk on eggshells around me. Just tell me the real reason you're here." Sayu spoke quietly, but her tone was unusually direct.

Issa looked pained, and his reply came slowly. "Apparently, the PTA has started to suspect she's keeping you locked in the house..."

The room fell dead silent. Neither Sayu nor I could bring ourselves to speak.

"It seems your homeroom teacher has dropped by the house multiple times since you left. Well, that's to be expected, of course... Mom didn't want to make a fuss, so she hasn't told anyone you ran away. To the rest of the world, it looks like you're just skipping school."

Sayu and I sat in silence, listening to what Issa was saying. The idea that Sayu's mother *didn't want to make a fuss* bothered me. It felt so out of place.

Was she more concerned about *making a fuss* than her own daughter running away? I had guessed Sayu's relationship with her mother wasn't great, but it sounded like the woman's attitude was totally beyond my comprehension.

Issa looked down at the table and continued.

"Naturally, your homeroom teacher kept visiting. And every time, Mom turned him away by telling him you wouldn't leave your room. That went on for more than six months... It's no surprise he grew suspicious. And so ___"

"She wants me to come back and clear up the misunderstanding for her," Sayu said, her tone as cold as ice.

Issa opened his mouth to respond, then stopped himself. Instead, he simply nodded.

Sayu looked down, and I frowned despite myself.

I still knew very little about what had driven Sayu to run away. However, I was sure that whatever it was, her mother was a big part of it.

Sayu was such a good-hearted girl. I couldn't imagine why her own mother would treat her this way, and it was starting to make me angry.

"You mean Sayu's mother never even wondered..." Before I knew what was happening, words were coming out of my mouth. Sayu and Issa both turned toward me. "...why Sayu ran away in the first place?"

When I'd finished, Issa's eyes darted around the floor for a couple of seconds. Then he gave a few small nods.

"...I can't say she's never wondered. But I doubt she's put any deep thought into it."

I couldn't help but sigh. "...I've never asked Sayu exactly why she left home, but..." If Sayu's mother really cared this little for her own daughter, I suspected she was the main reason Sayu had run away. "I feel like I'm beginning to understand."

Issa let out a sigh of his own. "I'm not proud of any of this."

Once again, silence filled the room. I hung my head, an indescribable feeling of disappointment swirling around in my chest. That was when I sensed Sayu looking my way.

I glanced up to find that she was, in fact, looking at me. Our eyes met.

“What is it?” I asked.

Sayu was quiet for a moment. Then she smiled sheepishly and lowered her head.

“I’m sorry. You must be shocked...hearing all this so suddenly...”

I felt something like rage bubble up inside me at her words.

But I didn’t know why I was angry or who that anger was directed at, so I took a deep breath and held it in.

“This was a shock for you, too, though...wasn’t it?” I asked, wringing the words from my chest. “Deep down...I think we both believed it’d be up to you to decide when you were ready to go home.”

“...Yeah.”

“And now... Well, it turns out it’s not that simple.”

I tried to summarize the situation as simply as I could, but the more I tried, the more keenly I felt our loss of control.

Sayu nodded once. Then she looked down and fell silent.

“Does Sayu—” I looked over at Issa. “Does she...have to go home no matter what?”

Issa furrowed his brow for a moment, then nodded once in silent affirmation.

“What our mother says goes,” he said. “At any rate, it will be difficult for Sayu to keep running away like this.”

“Can you just give her a few extra days?”

“A few extra days...?” Issa repeated, mulling this over.

I held his gaze as I continued.

“Sayu’s been working hard to build up the courage to go home on her own, but it seems like she needs a little more time. Besides, if she was willing to give in and go home just because someone told her to, I doubt she’d have run all the way here in the first place.”

Issa listened to me in silence.

“That’s why I’m asking for an extension. Just a few days would be enough. She needs some time...to think things through.”

When I finished my appeal, Issa looked me right in the eye for a few moments. Then he turned away and appeared to think it over.

His reply came slowly.

“Can you give Sayu and me a few moments to ourselves to discuss the idea? I promise I won’t run off with her in the meantime.”

His expression was serious—he didn’t look like he was trying to trick me. We might be in my apartment, but this was Sayu’s future we were discussing. Issa clearly had the right to make the decisions here. Going out of his way to promise he wouldn’t run off with her was a show of respect to both Sayu and me.

“...Go ahead.”

Unable to think of a reason to say no, I nodded.

Issa looked relieved. Then he turned toward his sister.

“Is that okay with you, Sayu?”

“...Sure.”

Sayu nodded meekly and got to her feet. It was then that she suddenly realized she was still in her pajamas. Glancing around the room in embarrassment, she asked, “Mind if I change first?”

Her brother nodded, a wry grin on his face, and told her he would wait for her in the car. Then he offered me a polite bow and left the apartment.

Sayu and I were now the only ones in the room and, once again, silence filled the air.

“...I-I’ll go change.”

“Y-yeah, okay.”

Sayu’s voice was stilted and awkward, and so was mine.

I sat on the bed facing the wall as Sayu briskly went about changing her clothes. As I heard the fabric brush against her skin, a restless feeling came over me that I found hard to define.

Sayu was going home.

This had been our shared goal from the very beginning.

And yet, now that the moment was finally here, I didn’t know what to do.

And Sayu... How did Sayu feel about it?

“Mr. Yoshida.”

Just as I was thinking of her, her voice called out to me from behind, causing me to jolt with surprise.

“What’s up?”

I was about to turn around when I felt a warmth at my back. I saw Sayu's arms appear at the corners of my vision as she wrapped them around my shoulders. Soon, I realized that she was hugging me from behind.

"Wh-what is it...?"

I was still in shock at the sudden gesture when I heard Sayu's voice coming from behind me again.

"...I'm...a little scared."

I struggled to come up with a reply.

"I knew I had to prepare myself for this... But now that it's finally happening...I keep hesitating."

She pressed her head against the base of my neck and said quietly, "It made me realize how...weak I am."

I shuddered at Sayu's words and reflexively took her hands, still wrapped around my shoulders, into mine.

"It's all right," I said before my mind could catch up. "I'm the same... Right now—"

I could feel my voice shaking, but that didn't matter. I had to tell her how I was feeling.

"...I'm terrified," I said.



I felt Sayu flinch against my back.

I slowly turned to face her, and our eyes met.

“We’re both scared... So it’s okay.”

She looked at me blankly for a few seconds; then her eyes opened wide in surprise.

She released me and began to pull the pleats of her uniform skirt taut as an indescribable, gentle smile crept over her face.

“Mr. Yoshida. I feel...”

She paused and took a deep breath to steady herself before continuing. Her words came out more slowly this time.

“I feel so safe when I’m with you.”

Sayu flashed me a grin, as if to reassure me. She looked much stronger than before.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ll be back.”

“...Okay. See you later.”

I could tell by her smile that she was putting on a brave face, but it seemed the hesitation she’d felt earlier was gone.

I watched her put on her shoes and step out the door, then heaved a long sigh.

Sayu and her older brother were about to have a lengthy discussion about what to do next.

But...what was I going to do?

I clapped my cheeks and headed for the washroom. After giving my face a quick, cold rinse, I picked up my electric razor and switched it on.

*

“That man...really cares about you,” my brother said from the driver’s seat of his car.

“Yeah,” I replied, nodding.

He sighed in relief.

“That’s good. I was worried sick over what kind of person you were staying with. I never imagined some stranger would take in another

person's child with pure intentions. I was terrified that you'd wound up living with some bad man and found yourself in trouble."

This made me feel a little guilty. True to my brother's concerns, I had stayed with a number of *bad men* before coming here.

I knew my brother was truly worried about me. He'd generously lent me money when I left and told me to come home when it ran out. Nevertheless, after using it all up on repeated hotel stays, I flouted his advice and cut off all contact with him. I'd fled. As a result, I ended up losing my virginity and almost losing my morals in one fell swoop.

Since he'd managed to track down Mr. Yoshida's apartment, it was possible my brother had also looked into the path I took to get here. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, but his gaze remained fixed on the steering wheel in front of him. It didn't seem like there was anything he wanted to say to me.

Whether my brother knew what I'd been through or not...there was no way I could admit it to him now.

Neither of us spoke. We sat together in the silent car for a little while, until my brother finally started again.

"...Mom's been calling me almost every day lately. She won't stop asking whether I've found you yet. She asks again and again, every day."

"...I see."

"...As you said, she's not necessarily worried—at least, I don't think so. It's just—"

"I know, I know... She gets emotional."

My words drew a bitter expression from my brother, and he silently nodded.

"Ever since 'the incident,' she's become unstable. And after you left home...it only got worse."

Both the phrase *the incident* and the news that my mother had grown worse since I left clawed at my heart.

I knew it wasn't because she was worried about me. But I wasn't coldhearted enough to feel no guilt over throwing my family into turmoil.

That said, if someone asked me if I could've stayed in that house, my answer would be "absolutely not."

To be honest, I still couldn't imagine going back. All those memories weighed heavy on my heart, and I wasn't mentally strong enough to carry on living there without anyone around to support me.

If only I had someone like Mr. Yoshida by my side...

I felt pathetic just thinking that.

Didn't I tell him I was working up the courage to go home? Wasn't I trying my best to do that?

Then my brother showed up, leaving me no choice. And yet, I was still looking for someone to lean on.

"I'll do everything in my power to give you whatever help you need. So please come home, just for now." My brother was looking me straight in the eye. "I know it's hard, I really do... But you can't keep running away forever. You need to come back to reality and give yourself time to adjust."

His words were sincere, and my gut told me that he was having a hard time with this, too. My brother really did have my best interests in mind, and this was just his version of tough love.

I knew that, and yet...

"I'm sorry..." Those were the first words to escape my mouth. "I'm still not ready... I mean, at first, I just ran away because it was hard."

My brother listened to me silently.

"But no matter where I ran, I still hurt. I didn't have anyone to protect me, and wherever I went, I was alone. But then...I met Mr. Yoshida."

My thoughts weren't in order when I started speaking, but for some reason, the words kept flowing from somewhere deep inside. I was expressing my innermost thoughts so clearly that I surprised even myself. It felt as if my feelings were being directly expelled from my body.

"Mr. Yoshida showed me how stupid I was and how many important things I'd cast aside on my way here. And...I've come to realize that I need to think carefully about what kind of person I want to be."

I heard my brother take a gulp of air. I wondered how he felt as he listened.

"How should I put this? ...I've spent the last few weeks thinking about... what I've gained from this experience that I can take home with me. And until I work out the answer..."

I paused and looked at my brother. Our eyes locked.

“...I don’t want to go home.” My answer was resolute, and my brother looked away, clearly shaken.

“I see...,” he said, his voice almost a whisper.

He scratched the back of his neck, then planted his hands on the steering wheel and tapped his fingers against it restlessly.

Still quiet, he added, “You’ve...changed a little.”

“Huh?”

My brother smiled wryly, and his tone grew gentler. “You express yourself more clearly than you used to.”

He looked happy as he said this, which made me a little self-conscious.

“Yeah... You might be right.”

I nodded, and he snorted in amusement. Soon, however, his serious expression was back in place.

“I understand how you feel, but you don’t have much time. I can buy you maybe a week at most.”

His words surprised me, and I peered at his face from the side.

Without turning his head, he shifted his gaze toward mine, and our eyes met.

“I can lie to Mom for a week and say I haven’t found you yet, but that’s the limit. She knows how quickly I can locate someone when I’m trying.”

“Does that mean...?”

As I stared, my brother blew a puff of air out of his nose.

“One week should be plenty of time for you to think things through,” he said, still facing away from me. “I can tell...that ‘Yoshida’ guy is trustworthy.”

My brother looked a little embarrassed admitting this, but it filled me with so much emotion that I couldn’t help leaning over and giving him a great big hug.

“Thank you!”

“Whoa! Be careful!”

It had been a long time since I’d been this close to my brother, and though he smelled like the same old cologne, he was very warm.

I felt tears rising in my eyes, but I held them in.

*

“I’m back.”

Sayu looked calmer when she reentered the apartment.

“Welcome back,” I replied.

She seemed a little happy as she shuffled tentatively into the living room. Then, with awkward motions, she plopped herself down on the carpet.

“He’s...letting me stay here a little longer.”

“Really? ...How much longer?”

“He said...a week.”

“Right...”

One week.

When Sayu’s brother showed up, I was filled with worry that he would take her home right then and there. But it seemed he was more considerate of her wishes than I’d anticipated.

Perhaps it wasn’t my place to think such things, but I was extremely relieved.

“In that case...you’ll have to try your best over the next seven days.”

Sayu nodded slowly.

“Yeah... I’ll make sure to think through everything properly.”

“Good.”

Our conversation ended there, and silence filled the apartment.

I got the feeling something was off with Sayu. She would shift her gaze toward me as if she wanted to say something, then look away just as quickly. She did this several times.

“What is it?” I asked, no longer able to sit and watch. Her shoulders jerked with surprise.

“Uh, it’s just...”

“Go on.”

Her mouth opened and shut a few times as she struggled to find the words. Finally, she seemed to come to a decision.

“...I wondered if you were gonna ask.”

“About what?”

“...About my past,” she replied.

I sucked in a long, slow breath, then exhaled.

I'd intentionally avoided broaching this topic since Sayu and I met.

"...Do you want to tell me?" I asked in a slow, steady tone.

Sayu swallowed hard, then nodded.

"I want you to hear...everything that's happened to me."

I felt my entire body tense, then slowly relax again.

Sayu had finally brought up the subject herself. That made me...truly happy.

"Okay... Let's hear it."

I tried to make my reply sound as natural as possible, but to my surprise, my voice came out a little shaky.

I looked up at Sayu, wondering if she noticed, and was met with a mischievous smirk. She *definitely* noticed.

"Sorry... I'm a bit nervous."

I realized there was no use trying to hide it and told Sayu the truth. She responded with a forceful nod.

"It's okay. I'm nervous, too," she said, coming to sit beside me.

"All right... Here I g—"

No sooner had she begun to speak than we were interrupted once again by the doorbell.

"Who is it now...?"

"Maybe it's my brother again."

Sayu was sitting closer to the front door and began to stand up, but I waved her back down and made my way over instead.

It was hard to believe I had yet another inconvenient visitor. But I didn't remember ordering anything, and the intercom just kept ringing. It was enough to make me suspicious, even without Sayu there.

I unlocked the door and slowly pulled it open.

"G'morning, let's get this party started! ...Oh, Yoshi. Why are *you* home?"

"Oh, it's just you..."

"Whaddaya mean, *it's just you*? Don't you have work today?"

"I've got the day off."

"Oh? How come?"

“I...”

I cast a glance back toward Sayu. She was waving at Asami, who was peeking through the doorway.

I turned to face Asami again, debating whether or not to explain the situation. It was a tough call, since I didn't have Sayu's permission.

“Uh, this isn't a great time, actually... Sayu and I are about to have an important conversation, so...”

Asami was blinking at me, obviously curious. I felt bad, but I had to turn her away. Then Sayu walked over from the living room and tapped me on the shoulder.

“What?”

“It's all right. Let her in.”

“Uh... Are you sure?”

“Yeah... I want her to hear, too.”

At that, Asami looked from Sayu to me, then tilted her head to one side.

“Huh? What's going on?”

“...Come in,” I said. “We'll talk inside.”

As long as Sayu was okay with it, there was no reason for me to protest.

Asami had no idea what was going on, but she clearly sensed the unusual mood. She timidly shuffled into the entryway and took off her shoes.

We headed into the living room and all sat down together, not too close and not too far apart.

I thought it best to start by explaining the situation to Asami. I looked to Sayu for her approval, and once I had it, I launched into a retelling of the day's events.

Asami looked shocked at first, but her expression soon evened out as she listened to the story.

“I see... So...” Asami looked around a bit as if trying to pick the right words. She continued carefully. “...That means Sasa has to go home in a week.”

“...Yeah.” Sayu nodded solemnly.

Asami sucked in a deep breath, then collapsed onto the bed with her belly facing the ceiling.

“Awww, I’m gonna miss you so much!” she said cheerfully, flailing her legs up and down.

Asami was so mature. Even when faced with news like this, she never made a sour face; instead, she purposely acted upbeat so as not to bring Sayu down.

Suddenly, she sat up from the bed and looked straight at Sayu.

“...But I’ve gotta support my homegirl coming to terms with her past. Or else what sort of friend would I be?”

Sayu choked up for a moment at Asami’s words, then nodded and responded in a nasal voice. “Yeah.”

Seeing the two of them together made me glad Asami had shown up.

I was hardly the most tactful person, and I doubted I’d know what to say in response to Sayu’s story on my own. I probably would have made the mood even heavier.

I glanced at Asami’s bag. She’d brought a backpack crammed full of textbooks. She must have come over to study with Sayu. It may have been a coincidence, but as far as I was concerned, her timing couldn’t have been more perfect... That said, I felt a little bad about ruining her study plans.

“...Okay, lay it on me,” Asami said, increasing the tension in the room once again.

“I’m...ready to listen, too,” I said, nodding.

Sayu sucked in a quiet breath, then slowly exhaled.

“...Okay. Well...here goes, then. Let me tell you about my past.”

And poof—just like that, I could sense Sayu’s demeanor change.

The look on her face was calm, but I couldn’t help feeling a gloomy aura had enveloped her shoulders.

Gradually, she began her story.

“When I was in eleventh grade...I was all alone.”

Chapter 3 Classroom

When I started high school, the first thing I felt was suffocation.

The classroom was always overflowing with rhythmic energy. This seemingly endless yet finite resource was parceled out among my classmates and me, and it felt as if we were all desperately fighting to see how much more we could take for ourselves.

I was always terrible at making an effort.

My mother didn't love me, and no matter how hard I tried or what results I got, she only praised my older brother, never me. Even my closest family members didn't care if I did well, so I had no reason to work harder than was absolutely necessary.

In elementary school and then in middle school, I put in just enough work, achieved okay grades, and got into an okay high school.

Once I entered high school, however, I noticed how much brighter my classmates seemed to shine.

Not that it bothered me. Things like classroom hierarchy and being liked or hated by my peers didn't matter to me anymore.

Once I realized I was different from the others...I lost all desire to make friends and socialize with them.

During my first year, I settled into a position where I had no friends but no enemies, either. And that was fine by me. As far as I was concerned, that was much better than trying to form the sparkling friendships other students had.

I'd decided to fight hard to maintain this comfortable position for the rest of my high school career, but that plan didn't go as well as I had hoped.

In the spring of my second year, a boy confessed to me.

He was so popular the year before that even I remembered his name. Since I spent the whole year keeping to myself and not socializing with anyone, that was pretty impressive. He was on the basketball team, and I remembered all the girls fawning over him when he was put in the starting lineup.

I had no idea why a popular guy like him had fallen for me.

He told me, "I've had a crush on you ever since first year." I was unable to hide my shock.

I couldn't believe someone at the center of attention like him had noticed someone like me who hung out at the margins. I'd never even noticed.

At the time, I thought dating sounded like a total hassle.

Rumors about romance would make the rounds in an instant. Even though I didn't join in the gossip myself, the girls in my class would discuss these things so loudly that I knew all the details of who was dating whom and who was breaking up.

If it ended with gossip, it wouldn't be such a big deal. But girls are terrifying. Soon, the topic would turn from who was dating whom to whether the pair was a good match, and it seemed the girls were driven to impose these nonsensical judgments on every couple.

It was acceptable for someone high in the school pecking order to date someone of similar social standing, and few had any qualms about it.

Personally, I thought that as long as two people liked each other, they should be free to date whomever they chose. But apparently, things weren't that simple.

Taking all that into consideration, I made my response: "...I'm sorry. I don't really know much about romance."

I refused his advances in the most inoffensive way possible.

Being on the fringe of school social life, it seemed obvious to me that dating one of the popular students would cause unnecessary backlash.

What's more, I really didn't understand what romance was all about back then.

For those two reasons, I turned down the basketball star. It wasn't until later that I found out how stupid I was.

“You know Yuzuki’s in love with Saitou, right?”

Saitou was the boy who had confessed his feelings to me. Yuzuki was a girl in my class.

A few days after Saitou told me he liked me, Yuzuki and a couple of her close friends called me out to an empty stairwell.

Yuzuki was part of the sparkling popular crowd that was always the center of attention in our class. She was pretty and good at sports, making her extremely popular with the boys. We’d been in the same class since our first year, and rumors about her being asked out by a different boy went around every few months.

As it turned out, she had feelings for Saitou.

I had no idea, so I just answered the question honestly.

Yuzuki, however, wasn’t pleased with that.

“Hmm... You didn’t know, huh?”

“No...”

I assumed she was upset that Saitou had confessed his feelings to me, so I immediately told her how it had ended.

“I turned him down.”

Yuzuki glared at me, rejecting this, too.

“I already knew that.”

“Th-then why...?”

Then why did you call me over? I thought.

Shouldn’t she be happy I’d rejected the guy she liked?

But Yuzuki flatly betrayed all my assumptions.

“How dare you turn him down? Who do you think you are?”

As I stood there, puzzled by her words, the bell rang to signal the start of class. The three girls said what they wanted and left.

It took me a few days to understand what she was trying to tell me, and by the time I did, I was completely isolated from the rest of the class.

It was true I didn’t have any friends to begin with.

But this time, people were so standoffish, I could tell they were making a deliberate attempt to alienate me. My peers started avoiding me completely without any effort to disguise it.

I had no idea what rumors were circulating about me, but the piercing gazes I received from my classmates made it obvious I had done something very wrong.

I didn't have any friends to start with, so there wasn't even anyone to tell me what the rumors were about.

For months, I spent my school life in solitude.

And yet.

In all honesty, it wasn't that bad.

Up until that point, I had chosen to be alone. The only thing that changed was that I no longer had a say in it.

It wasn't like what you see in manga or TV dramas; no one took my belongings or beat me up. I was simply shut out from the class social circle.

At first, it felt like a hassle. But within a week, I was already over it.

As long as I kept my grades up, my mother didn't pry into the details of my school life.

Everything was fine.

I carried on, passing the weeks aimlessly. Until one day, she appeared.



Chapter 4 Friend

“Why are you so cool?”

It was a particularly hot and humid day not long before summer vacation, and I was eating lunch on the roof of the school when a girl named Yuuko Masaka came up and started talking to me.

Her long hair was tied in pigtails, and she was wearing unfashionable black-framed glasses.

Yuuko was in my class both first and second year, but that was all I really knew about her. She didn't stand out, and I didn't remember her being friendly with anyone in particular.

In hindsight, it was reasonable—or rather inevitable—that I felt that way. Like me, she wasn't friends with any of our classmates, so of course I wouldn't remember her hanging out with any of them.

“I've been watching you this whole time, Sayu.”

“...This whole time?”

“Yeah. Ever since we were freshmen,” she said, sitting down next to me.

“Everyone else pretends to be friends with one another, like being alone isn't even an option. But you seem totally fine by yourself.”

I gazed blankly at her from the side. Her eyes sparkled as she spoke.

“Even if people pick on you or isolate you from the rest of the class, you're still the same. You seem to shine even brighter when you're alone.”

Yuuko spoke in a rush and stared at me through her glasses. Her eyes were big and round. Then she repeated her original question.

“Why are you so...cool?”

“Uhhh... I don’t really know how to answer that.”

I’d never thought of it as cool to hang out by myself and was surprised to learn one of my classmates saw me that way.

Plus, it had been so long since I’d had more than the bare minimum of conversation with anyone at school that I was completely flustered.

As I sat there in silence, Yuuko tugged at the sleeve of my uniform.

“Um... If it’s all right...”

Her tone had changed dramatically, and her voice trembled slightly as she spoke.

I looked up and found myself locking eyes with her.

“...will you be my friend?” she asked.

She said it so earnestly, it sounded almost like a love confession. The passion in her voice and her stare made my heart skip a beat, and I went silent for a few moments.

At last, I managed to reply.

“...Sure, I guess.”

*

Yuuko was the first friend I made at school, and she was very sociable—especially from my perspective.

Whenever there was a small break in class, she would immediately come over to my desk and start rambling about some topic or other. Every day, we’d eat our lunch together on the roof and walk home together.

I’d always thought I was fine being alone. No, I *was* fine. I never once found it difficult.

However, once Yuuko came into my life, I realized just how fun it was to have someone you could talk to as an equal.

“Sayu, I always thought you looked so cool from afar, but...”

I’ll never forget what Yuuko said to me one day during lunch.

“...you look even better when you’re smiling!”

Now that I remember it, I don't think I smiled much up until then. Perhaps when I was a toddler, but that doesn't count. Back then I was an innocent child, with no knowledge of ties and obligations. As I grew up and started to understand my situation, my smile disappeared.

My father wasn't around.

My mother didn't love me.

My big brother was the only person who cared about me. But when he started preparing to take over as president of our father's company, he grew too busy to spend time with me.

No matter how hard I tried, my mother never acknowledged my efforts.

No matter how well I got along with others, I couldn't hang out with them.

Those harsh truths piled up, one on top of the other. My emotional capacity was crushed under their weight, leaving me blank.

Slowly but surely, those days I spent with Yuuko helped me recover my smile. It made me happy to know I could smile so naturally.

My mother's rules were strict, even after I started high school. I had to come straight home after classes, so I couldn't hang out with Yuuko outside of school.

But as long as I was at school, I could see her.

Spending time with Yuuko made my school life so much fun.

...However, those enjoyable days didn't last long.

*

The first thing I noticed was a change in the way people looked at us.

I'd seen people avoiding us or laughing at us before. That was to be expected. From their perspective, we were just a pair of loners sticking together.

I thought I was used to that.

And yet, at some point, their glares started feeling more intense—they were heavier and more oppressive. It was nothing more than a feeling, but although I couldn't put into words exactly what had changed, I could tell something was different.

Next, I realized Yuuko was behaving strangely.

She came to my desk less and less during breaks. And, when she *did* come, she would look around nervously as we talked, like she was scared.

Something is wrong, I thought.

One day, as we sat on the roof during lunch break, I plucked up the courage to press Yuuko for answers. I had a bad feeling about the whole thing.

“Hey, Yuuko. Did something happen recently?”

Yuuko was clearly upset by this question. She looked around anxiously before finally shaking her head.

“No, nothing.”

“That’s not true. You haven’t come to talk to me during break lately, and you’re acting strange. Did someone do something to you?”

As I questioned her, I felt more and more certain.

Yuuko was probably being harassed by someone when I wasn’t looking. It must be bringing her down, and spending time with me had become a burden.

“...No, seriously... It’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“Hey.”

I put my hands on either side of Yuuko’s head and turned her face toward mine. She looked away for a moment like she was scared but soon gave up and met my gaze.

“Tell me the truth. I’ll listen,” I said carefully.

Her mouth opened and closed a few times, and then she started crying.

I panicked as I watched the tears gush down her face.

“Huh? Yuuko, why are you—?”

“I’m sorry... I didn’t want to cry in front of you.”

The fact that Yuuko couldn’t hold back her tears made me suspect that things were even more serious than I’d thought. I hurriedly pulled a handkerchief from my skirt pocket and handed it to her.

Yuuko wouldn’t stop crying, and she eventually started loudly sobbing.

I rubbed her back until she calmed down. Once she’d regained her composure somewhat, she began to speak, though her words were slow and disjointed.

Just as I thought, Yuzuki and her clique had been bullying Yuuko.

Not only that, but they were being crueler to her than they ever were to me.

According to Yuuko, they bad-mouthed her loudly enough for her to hear whenever she went to the restroom. They said she followed me around like poop clinging to the back of a goldfish. Recently, they'd even started hiding her books and stationery.

From what I heard, it sounded like they were subjecting her to silly, grade school-level bullying. I was relieved they weren't attacking her physically, but I could only imagine how much this kind of taunting was eating away at her. She'd burst out crying, after all. It must have really upset her.

"I'm not strong like you, Sayu. Even the tiniest bit of teasing is enough to make me miserable...and frightened."

"That's not true. I've never had to put up with people bullying me like that."

Yuuko often overestimated me.

I wasn't as strong as she thought. She called me a lone wolf, but being alone wasn't something I was proud of, and I didn't do it because I thought it was cool or impressive. I just felt comfortable being by myself.

"Why are they doing that to you...?"

That was the part that puzzled me.

I was the one Yuzuki resented, so why was Yuuko being harassed?

When I asked Yuuko about this, the corners of her mouth turned up in a self-deprecating smile, and she let out a long sigh. Hesitantly, she looked up at me.

"I don't think you realize it, Sayu," she began, "but you have a really pretty face, and you look tough."

"Huh?"

"No matter what, you never come out looking like the bad guy. They can paint you as unapproachable, but they can't make you into a target."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Yuuko looked down at the floor as she continued. Her words flowed more easily than usual.

“Meanwhile, I’m plain and ugly. It’s easy for people to accuse me of being gloomy and asocial. And since I’m always clinging to you, I get called goldfish poop...though I guess they’re right about that—”

“None of that is true!!”

I interrupted Yuuko, half shouting, and her eyes went wide. The loudness of my voice shocked me, too. But there was something I needed her to know.

“There’s no justification for saying and doing things like that to you. You can’t just accept it...”

My voice was strained, and I could feel myself tearing up.

I was frustrated.

“Yuuko...you’re my first real friend...”

My friend was being bullied because of me, and I’d been going about my life, completely oblivious. And now Yuuko was about to succumb to the nonsensical logic of the mob.

All of this frustrated me.

For the first time in my life, I cried tears of frustration. My nose was starting to run, so I frantically dug a hand in my pocket to grab my handkerchief, only to remember that Yuuko was already using it.

I tried to hide my tear- and snot-soaked face, not wanting her to see it, but it wasn’t long before a neatly folded handkerchief was thrust into my face. It was Yuuko’s.

“Here.”

“...Thanks.”

I took her handkerchief and wiped my face. Then it hit me that we’d traded handkerchiefs, and I started giggling to myself.

Yuuko saw me laughing and joined in.

“I told you,” she said, her tone relaxed, “you’re much prettier when you smile.”

“...So are you, Yuuko.”

“...Yeah. Thanks, Sayu.”

We patted each other’s heads, finally able to smile again.

“If anything’s ever upsetting you, I wanna know all about it. I’ll never let you down, Yuuko... Let’s fight this together.”

“...Okay!”

I thought we were invincible.

I wanted to help change Yuuko’s situation. Even if the bullying didn’t stop, we could always escape it together.

I promised myself we would.

...However, looking back now, I think that promise may have been my biggest mistake.

No, I still don’t know what the right thing to do was.

But there’s no denying I messed up back then.

That much is certain.

Chapter 5 Rooftop

One day during lunch break, as Yuuko and I were making our way to the roof, Yuuko said, “I’m gonna use the bathroom. Go ahead—I’ll be up in a sec.”

I nodded and went to wait for her on the roof, but after twenty minutes, she still hadn’t turned up. Naturally, I began to worry. Maybe she simply had an upset stomach. But she’d seemed fine earlier, and I was worried she was caught up in another incident.

Driven by my apprehension, I headed to the bathroom closest to where Yuuko and I had parted ways. Based on the direction she’d been walking, there was only one she could’ve gone to.

I could hear voices coming from inside as I approached. It seemed like I’d been right to worry.

I flung open the door to the restroom and found one girl standing in front of a sink with a group of other girls facing her.

As expected, the lone girl was Yuuko, and the group surrounding her was Yuzuki’s clique.

Distracted by my abrupt entrance, all the girls turned and looked at me.

Yuzuki frowned a little awkwardly, and for some reason, Yuuko turned away like she’d done something wrong.

“...What’s going on?”

My voice came out lower than I’d expected, surprising me.

Yuzuki was always loud, but this time, her response was quiet. Maybe my tone intimidated her.

“Nothing... We were just having a little chat,” she said.

“With the three of you crowding around her? For more than twenty minutes?”

“What’s the problem?” she snapped back, casting me a sharp glare.

The way I kept pressing her must have wounded her pride. Without wavering, I stared right back at her.

“We were planning on eating lunch together. You’ve kept her trapped here long enough.”

“...Oh, I see.”

Yuzuki let out a deliberate sigh, then turned to face Yuuko.

“Go on.”

“O-okay...”

Yuuko timidly made her way past Yuzuki and me and left the restroom. As I turned to follow her, I heard Yuzuki’s voice from behind.

“Hey.”

“...What?”

“I know you don’t have any friends, but do you really need to keep that gloomy weirdo as a pet? You don’t have to stoop that low. I’ll even let you join our group if you want.”

Instantly, I felt my blood begin to boil.

She genuinely thought I hung around Yuuko only because I didn’t have anyone else. I couldn’t believe it.

“I don’t *need* friends. But Yuuko talks to me like we’re equals. She’s my friend, and you better not talk shit about her.”

I said all this in a single breath. Yuzuki’s face tensed up for a moment as if she felt daunted, but she quickly let out another sigh and glared at me.

“Hmm... Well, okay, then.”

For some reason, the girls behind Yuzuki started giggling.

Fed up, I walked out of the restroom.

Yuuko was standing outside, looking shaken.

“Sayu—”

“Don’t sweat it. Let’s just go to the roof.”

Yuuko was trying to tell me something, but I cut her off and led her away. Everything was fine.

If the other students bullied Yuuko, I would defend her whenever I had the chance. I was determined to take on Yuzuki and her clique if I had to.

“Hey,” Yuuko said once we reached the roof. Her voice was quiet. “Sayu...don’t you think you should join their group?”

Her question startled me.

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, I...I overheard your conversation in the bathroom.”

“I said no, didn’t I? I like spending time with you.”

“I feel the same way, but...”

Yuuko covered her eyes, and her voice grew nasal.

“If they start bullying you, too, because of me...I won’t be able to bear it.”

I had no idea how to respond.

This had all started because of a conflict between Yuzuki and me. It seemed Yuuko had the sequence of events all mixed up. If she hadn’t gotten involved with me, she would never have been bullied in the first place.

“Don’t say that. I’m fine. We just have to hold out until graduation.”

I grasped Yuuko’s hand firmly in mine and tried desperately to convince her.

She nodded over and over as tears welled up in her eyes.

“You’re right...,” she said. “I’ll be fine as long as you’re with me.”

...And I believed her.

*

After that encounter, Yuuko’s bullying got even worse.

Yuzuki seemed to know exactly how to get under my skin. The more I tried to protect Yuuko, the more they tormented her when she was out of my sight.

Yuuko’s stationery, textbooks, and even her feminine hygiene products started to go missing.

At one point, I asked our homeroom teacher for help, but she blew me off, saying we couldn’t be sure that Yuzuki and her friends were the

culprits. Finding out even the teachers weren't on our side left me bitter and frustrated.

Obviously, the bullying had worn Yuuko down, and it had gradually exhausted me as well. School, which Yuuko had once made so fun, was now a painful struggle. I thought about skipping class countless times, but my mother would never allow it. And more importantly, I couldn't bear the thought of leaving Yuuko to fight for herself. So I sucked it up and kept going every day.

I thought that if Yuzuki and her friends eventually got tired of bullying us and left us alone, we'd win.

...But before we could taste victory, everything fell apart.

*

One day, Yuuko didn't show up at school. That wasn't like her.

Despite all the bullying, she never missed school. But while her sudden absence surprised me, I was also relieved.

Our teacher said she wasn't feeling well, and I hoped Yuuko would get the chance to rest her mind along with her body.

I spent the morning classes in a daze, and before I knew it, it was lunchtime.

As I walked up the stairs to the roof, it occurred to me that I hadn't eaten lunch alone in a long time.

Before Yuuko approached me, I'd always been alone. It had been normal for me. And yet, it already felt strange to not have her around.

Yuuko had said she would be fine as long as I was with her. I felt the same.

As long as I had Yuuko, it didn't matter if I had no other friends or if people shot me mean looks in the hallways. I knew things would be okay.

When I reached the rooftop, I noticed that someone else had gotten there first.

It was unusual for anyone besides Yuuko or me to go up there. But the scene that greeted me wasn't just strange—it was intensely unsettling.

I didn't mind company, per se.

It was where the other girl was standing that bothered me.

She was on the other side of the rail, built high enough to stop students from leaning over it.

Hearing me open the door, she turned around.

I felt my chest constrict.

“What are you doing, Yuuko?”

The girl standing on the other side of the rail was Yuuko.

She smiled, eerily calm.

“Sayu.”

“Hey, that’s not safe! Come here. Why are you...? I thought you were at home.”

“I was here, waiting for you,” she continued quietly, as if she hadn’t heard me. “The first time I saw you, I thought you were really pretty. I thought someone as cute as you would make lots of friends and be the center of attention in class. But you never did. You were independent and beautiful, and no one could get close to you.”

“Hey, what are you talking about?”

“No matter what tricks those silly girls came up with, you stayed aloof. You were so cool. That’s why...I tried to get to know you. A pathetic girl like me wound up making friends with you.”

She seemed almost possessed as she went on cheerfully. But the real problem was that she was standing outside the railing. We were so high up. What if she slipped?

“When we got closer, I found out you were just a regular, cute girl. You were kind and thoughtful...and you had a lovely smile.”

Yuuko paused and shifted her gaze toward me. Her cold stare sent a shiver down my spine.

“And then I went and ruined it.”

“What? That’s not true!”

“Yes, it is. I ruined you, Sayu! You were so independent and beautiful, and now you’re being treated like an idiot for hanging out with a depressing girl like me. They’re making fun of you! But you’re not stupid; you’re beautiful and amazing!”

“I don’t care what they think. As long as you know the real me, that’s all I need.”

“No, it isn’t!!” Yuuko shouted at the top of her lungs.

I was at a loss for words.

I didn’t understand what she was getting at. I had no idea what she was thinking or why she was so angry.

“You’re not like me, Sayu... You can shine brighter... I admired you more than anyone, but...I tarnished you...”

Tears started streaming from Yuuko’s eyes, and she crouched down behind the railing.

This was my chance.

I had to get closer, reach past the rail, and grab hold of her. If she lost her balance even a little, her life might be in danger.

As Yuuko crouched, I slowly made my approach.

But she noticed immediately what I was doing. She bolted to her feet and turned her tear-soaked face toward me.

“Have you noticed, Sayu? You’ve stopped smiling again. When we’re together, all you ever think about is how you can protect me. You always look so sad.”

“Well, of course,” I answered. “You’re my friend.”

The corners of Yuuko’s mouth turned up slightly, but I couldn’t tell if she was happy or sad.

“...Thanks, but...that’s what hurts the most. I can’t take it anymore.”

Suddenly, a peaceful smile spread across her face.

The moment I saw her expression change, my mind screamed out, *Don’t let this happen!* My body lunged forward.

Yuuko spoke again.

“This isn’t your fault, Sayu.”

“Yuuko!”

“Never...stop smiling,” she said, grinning.

Then, with a little skip, she fell from the roof.

I was charging forward, but there was no longer anyone to reach for. I fell flat against the rooftop.

My whole body began shaking.

I heard screams coming from the school courtyard.

“Aaaah...”

I looked up. Yuuko was gone. This was really happening.

“Aaaaaaaaaaahhh...!”

An unintelligible wail escaped my lungs, and my vision blurred.

I crept toward the edge of the rooftop, leaned over the railing, and looked down.

And there...

*

Sayu’s face went pale, and she brought her hands to her mouth.

Before I had the chance to properly register what was happening, she vomited right in front of us.

Asami had nestled closer to Sayu halfway through her story, so her skirt got soaked.

“I-I’m so sorry... Your skirt...!”

Even at a time like this, Sayu was worried about Asami’s clothes, but the other girl was completely unfazed.

“It’s fine, Sayu... I can wash it,” Asami replied. “I know you needed to let it out.” Sayu’s expression relaxed.

“Thank y— *Bleugh!*”

Sayu puked on the carpet again, as if she couldn’t hold it back any longer.

“Yoshi, can you bring us a cloth or something?”

“Yeah, be right back.”

At Asami’s suggestion, I headed to the washroom. I’d bought a bunch of washcloths intending to clean the whole apartment, but I’d never gotten around to it.

As I grabbed a few of these, I pressed my other hand against my stomach.

Hearing about Sayu’s past had been more challenging than I’d expected. I had thought I was mentally prepared for whatever upsetting story Sayu might tell us, but I’d been naive, and I regretted it.

“Here. Use these.”

I handed washcloths to Asami and Sayu, and they began wiping their clothes while I cleaned the carpet.

“Sorry, Mr. Yoshida...”

“It’s all right. Go drink some water and relax. We can leave the rest of the story for another day.”

“Thanks...”

Sayu meekly made her way to the kitchen and got herself a glass of water.

Once she’d taken a moment to collect herself, she made a suggestion.

“If it’s all right with you two...I wanna tell the whole story today. I’m ready.”

Sayu had a determined glint in her eyes, and I couldn’t think of a reason to disagree.

“Sure.” I nodded. Then I looked at each of the girls in turn. “Maybe you should get changed first, though.”

The two of them smiled wryly and nodded.

Chapter 6 Wandering

Sayu changed out of her pajamas and into her school uniform; Asami, lacking any other options, borrowed a sweatshirt and bottoms from me.

“I’m sorry. That’s all I’ve got. At least they’re clean.”

“Smells like old man.”

“Seriously?!”

“Worried? Lol.” Asami cackled before adding, “I was just kidding!”

A high school girl telling me I smelled like an old man was way too realistic to laugh about. If she wasn’t serious, I wished she’d spare me the confusion.

“Besides, Sasa was the one who washed this stuff for you, right? When I think about it that way, they smell so much nicer... Mmmm...”

“Your sense of smell is mega sus,” I said, only to be met with more cackling from Asami.

I glanced over at Sayu. She wasn’t quite back to normal, but Asami’s playfulness had brought a small smile to her face.

I was glad to see her looking a little calmer.

She’d just shared a traumatic story and thrown up. She might feel ready to continue, but I was hoping she’d take a breather, at least.

I’d gotten queasy just listening, and Sayu was *telling* the story. She must be reliving all those difficult experiences as she spoke. I was certain she’d vomited at that point in the story because she couldn’t help remembering her friend’s lifeless body.

The more I thought about it, the worse I felt that a teenager had been forced to endure something like that.

Asami wasn't looking at Sayu, either, but it was clear that she was concerned. I could see her casually peering over at the other girl out of the corner of her eye as she made small talk with me.

We shared some friendly conversation for a few minutes after the two of them changed clothes; then we all fell silent.

After several seconds of quiet, Sayu spoke.

"All right... I guess I'll continue."

"Are you feeling better?" Asami asked gently.

"Yeah. I think I've calmed down."

"Okay, then."

Sayu smiled back at Asami, then looked over at me.

I was ready to hear the rest.

"If you're good, I'm good," I told her.

Sayu nodded. She took in a deep breath, then let it out.

Finally, she resumed her story.

*

Yuuko took her own life, and I was plunged into the depths of sadness and despair.

I had thought we'd run away together, but she'd left without me in the most awful way possible.

I'd believed I was protecting her, but I was completely oblivious to the true nature of her suffering. This filled me with sadness and regret.

I was so overwhelmed, I could've spent days—no, months wallowing in grief. But reality wasn't so accommodating.

As the sole witness to Yuuko's fall, I was immediately and repeatedly questioned about the incident.

My student guidance counselor, the principal, and the police interrogated me over and over again.

All I could do was tell them exactly what had happened, and it was heartbreaking to relive my friend's death over and over again and have strangers speculate about my involvement.

Yuuko had been my dearest friend, but I could no longer think of her face without my stomach cramping up in pain. I couldn't sleep at night, either.

A few days after Yuuko's suicide, the media started gathering at my house.

Whenever I left for school or came back home, reporters and adults with TV cameras would be standing outside. It was like they knew exactly when to show up to catch me. I heard that even while I was gone, the doorbell never stopped ringing.

My mother couldn't take it.

She already thought of me as a burden, and now I'd brought home even more trouble.

On the very day Yuuko passed, I tearfully explained to my mother what had happened. With a sigh, she replied, "Even *you* wouldn't kill one of your classmates, right?"

I was so shaken by her words that my tears, which had been uncontrollable moments earlier, abruptly stopped.

"...No, I would never," I replied with a small shake of my head.

I almost added that Yuuko was my only friend, but I stopped myself.

My brother, who was normally too busy to visit us, started coming by every day.

He would calm my distraught mother and come to check on me whenever he had the chance.

I cried into his chest countless times.

For weeks, I would see Yuuko's name on the news whenever I turned on the TV, so I stopped watching.

I started to fear the sound of the doorbell and the reporters who would hassle me whenever I went out. I stopped going to school.

My mom, who sent me to class even when I was sick to keep up appearances, said nothing when I told her I no longer wanted to go.

I spent my days afraid of strangers and my mother's bad moods and my nights terrified by the memories of Yuuko I couldn't forget.

This wore me down and, in turn, took its toll on the rest of the Ogiwara family.

Our relationship was like a dam about to overflow, and one day, it finally burst.

I woke up early in the morning and entered the living room to find my mother sitting there, weeping.

“What’s wrong...?”

When I tried to ask what had happened, my mother lifted her head, which had been slumped on the table, and glared at me sharply.

“This is all your fault...!”

She always said things like that when she was upset.

I didn’t know the details, but I’d heard my birth was the reason for my parents’ divorce. That was why my mother never loved me.

Ever since divorcing my father, my mother suffered from regular bouts of emotional instability. And whenever she saw me during these periods, that was her go-to line.

“Your brother is doing a great job working to take over his dad’s company, but all you ever do is cause trouble for us!”

“I’m sorry.”

As long as I continued apologizing, my mother would be temporarily satisfied and go to sleep. It seemed these episodes took a lot out of her.

“Why do we have to suffer like this just because some girl went and offed herself...? It’s all because you pretended to be her friend, even though you don’t have any feelings!”

“...I’m sorry.”

I did have feelings; I just did my best not to express them in front of her.

If I held everything in, it would all blow over.

I thought I’d be able to endure it again this time. I just had to take her abuse until she got it out of her system; then it would end.

But...

My mom’s eyes suddenly went wide with shock as she looked at me.

This was unusual. Confused, I tilted my head slightly to one side.

“Could it be...,” my mother wondered aloud, “...you actually killed her?”

That was the last straw. I cracked.

Before I knew it, I'd run over to her and slapped her in the face. This was the first time in my life I had resorted to violence.

"Fuck you!! I could never do something like that!!"

It was also the first time in my life I had screamed from sheer rage.

I was used to her abuse.

But I couldn't stand being accused of killing Yuuko. I felt like my mother had completely denied our friendship.

She had no idea how much I loved Yuuko.

"You don't even know, Mom!! She was the first person I could be myself around, and she got bullied because of me, and then..."

All the emotions I'd been repressing raged out of control.

My mother stared at me blankly.

With huge tears pouring from my eyes, I grasped her shirt collar and shook her over and over.

"I feel like it's my fault she died... You could never understand!!"

"You..."

"If my presence offends you that much, I'll disappear! I'm sick and tired of you talking to me like I'm a piece of shit!!"

I fled to my bedroom.

There, I put on my school uniform, packed the bare minimum of what I thought I'd need, and grabbed my wallet.

Just as I was about to leave my room, the door popped open, and my older brother poked in his head.

"What was all that fuss about...? Wait, why are you in your uniform? Are you going to school?"

"No. I'm leaving."

"Leaving? Where to? When will you be back?"

"It doesn't matter! I'm never coming home again!!"

"Hey!"

I pushed past him, ran to the front door, and stormed out of the house.

My brother followed me outside and sprinted down the street at full speed. Of course, there was no way I could outrun a grown man, so it didn't take long for him to catch up.

"Let go of me!"

“Stop fighting back! Just calm down for a minute!”

“But!!” Tears started pouring down my face again as I whimpered. “Mom asked...if I killed her...”

My brother fell silent, then patted me on the back.

“She really said that, huh?” He slowly pulled me in for a hug before speaking a little more quietly. “I do think you and Mom need a little time apart. Your and Mom’s mental health is more important than our reputation.”

With that, he took my hand and started leading me away.

“I’ll see you to the station.”

“Oh...okay.”

I thought he’d be against my leaving, so his reaction left me a little deflated. I nodded anyway.

We walked all the way to the station in complete silence, but simply having my brother by my side reassured me somewhat.

When we arrived, he said, “Wait a second,” and walked over to an ATM.

He returned a moment later and passed me a weighty envelope.

“If you leave home without any money, you’ll end up back here in no time.”

“B-but...”

“There’s three hundred thousand yen in there. If you’re careful, it’ll last you a few weeks.”

“No way! You don’t have to do this!”

My brother flashed me a wry smile.

“It’ll cause more problems if I let you leave home with nothing. Stay at a proper hotel, okay? Make sure to call me if you ever feel like you’re in danger. If you promise me you’ll stick to those two conditions, I’ll smooth things over with Mom.”

I stared at the envelope in my hand, then gave my brother a hug.

“...Thanks.”

“...You’ve done well, staying strong up until now. Take a little break.”

He ran a hand across my head, then gave me a firm pat on the shoulder.

“I’ll see you when I get back,” I said.

“See you then. If you run into any trouble, contact me right away, okay?”

“I will.”

I think my brother was more of a parent to me than my mother ever was.

I wondered if this was the way a parent was meant to express concern for their child... But I quickly pushed the thought from my mind.

And with that, for the first time in my life, I ran away from home.

*

After I ran away, I was alone in the truest sense of the word.

In my hotel room, it didn't matter what I did. No one could see me or say anything about it.

Suddenly endowed with this newfound freedom, the very first thing I experienced was a sense of emptiness.

“What even am I...?” I muttered to myself repeatedly. But I could never find the answer.

I was born into this world without a mother's love.

My big brother cared about me, but his kindness always felt tinged with pity.

I was never able to make any friends, and when I finally found one, she left me behind.

Now that I thought about it, maybe I'd never meant anything to anyone.

My physical isolation only exacerbated my feelings of loneliness.

I kept questioning what I was even doing, borrowing 300,000 yen from my brother.

I'd finally managed to escape from my mom, but I didn't feel any better.

Sometimes I felt compelled to act out, but I wasn't brave enough to try alcohol or cigarettes. So instead, I spent the days naked in my hotel room pleasuring myself. I always felt pathetic when it was over, but for some reason, I couldn't stop.

The hotel stays quickly drained my funds, and I was eventually left with only a fraction of the money my brother had lent me.

He had told me to stay somewhere safe, but I figured I could make do in an Internet café for a week with the 20,000 or 30,000 yen I had left, so I hung out in one of those until I'd spent almost everything I had.

Apparently, my brother had calculated how long the money would last me more carefully than I'd thought, and on around my third day at the Internet café, my phone started ringing constantly.

"Where are you?"

"At a hotel."

"What hotel? If you were staying at a hotel every night, you would have run out of money by now."

I can't remember how I managed to wriggle my way out of that one.

But a few days later, he must have realized I was lying, because my phone began to ring even more incessantly.

Before I knew it, I'd stopped caring about anything. Even I was surprised.

I knew I didn't want to go back to my mom's house. I couldn't imagine ever repairing our relationship.

I owed my brother a lot for helping me run away, and I felt bad breaking the promise I'd made to him. But I just wanted him to leave me alone.

I drained my phone battery and tossed it straight into a trash can outside a random convenience store.

I had no money and no motivation to think deeply about anything.

One night, I was wandering around the city, unsure of what to do with myself, when a man in a suit called out to me.

"What's a high school girl like you doing out this late?"

The man looked a little drunk, and his face was flushed. Only then did it occur to me it was a Friday.

I was surprised at how easily I forced a smile.

"I ran away from home, and I don't have anywhere to stay."

"...Hmmm."

Staring at me, the man paused to think for a moment.

"It's dangerous out here," he said. "How about you stay the night at my place?"

I felt apprehension course through my body.

This was definitely one of those dangerous situations my brother had told me to watch out for.

But by then, I didn't care what happened to me.

Plus, if I played my cards right, I'd secure a place to stay for a while.

Before I knew it, I'd given him my answer.

“...Are you sure it's no trouble?”



Chapter 7 Footprints

“...That’s how it started, and I never went home again.”

Tears formed in Sayu’s eyes as she spoke.

Asami and I listened, our gazes on the floor.

“At first, I thought he might be letting me stay out of the goodness of his heart, but that wasn’t true. A few days later, he straight up asked me for sex... I would have done anything to avoid going home, so I agreed,” she said with a wry grin. She looked fed up with herself.

“I’m so stupid. I don’t even remember the name of the first man I slept with.”

“Sayu...”

Asami gripped Sayu’s hand tightly. Her voice was shaking.

“After that, it’s just like I told Mr. Yoshida. I’d already done it once, so I figured it didn’t matter how many more times I did it. If I offered men my body, I’d get a place to stay. So that’s what I did, moving from one spot to the next. I kept running endlessly...until I met Mr. Yoshida.”

Sayu looked over at me just as a tear ran down her cheek.

The sight got me all choked up again.

“That’s everything I wanted to tell you about my past—my journey from the time I left Hokkaido until I met Mr. Yoshida... The whole story.”

Sayu looked slightly more relaxed now that she’d gotten everything off her chest.

That was the one saving grace in this situation.

“...I see,” I said, letting out a slow breath and nodding. “...Thanks for telling us.”

Sayu nodded a few times as well.

“Thanks for listening.”

“Sayu,” Asami piped up. We both turned toward her. She looked Sayu right in the eye and said, “You’ve fought so hard all this time.”

I could see Sayu’s eyes begin to tremble with emotion at Asami’s words. Soon, tears were welling up at their corners.

“Yeah,” Sayu said with a nod.

“I’m mad impressed.”

Asami nodded, too, and pulled Sayu’s head into her chest with her right arm, using her left to pat the other girl’s back.

With her face buried in Asami’s chest, Sayu nodded again.

“...Yeah. I fought really hard,” she said.

Sayu wrapped her arms around Asami’s shoulders and began to sniffle. Before I knew it, she was weeping out loud.

I could feel my own eyes watering, but I managed to stifle my tears.

Sayu continued sobbing for a few minutes before falling asleep in Asami’s embrace.

“...Telling a story like that would tire anyone out,” Asami said as she lifted Sayu off her chest and laid her down on the carpet.

“She’d probably be comfier in bed, but if I lift her up, I’ll wake her.”

“Yeah... Let’s leave her there for now.”

I gently draped Sayu’s usual blanket over her as she slept, then went back to my seat on the carpet.

I let out a long, slow breath.

My thoughts were all over the place. The story of Sayu’s past and the look on her face as she told it swirled around in my head, disappearing, then coming back again with a vengeance.

“...I need a smoke. Do you mind?” I asked Asami.

She looked perplexed for a moment, but it wasn’t long before the corners of her mouth turned up in a grin.

“You do you, bro. I’ll come with, actually.”

“Don’t... You’ll wind up smelling like cigarette smoke.”

“I don’t mind. It’ll only be for a minute,” she stated, unperturbed.

The two of us stepped out onto the veranda together.

I took out a cigarette and lit it with my Zippo lighter. I breathed in the smoke, then exhaled.

Going through this ritual made me feel strangely calmer.

“Feeling a little more relaxed?”

Asami cast me a sidelong glance from where she stood on the veranda.

“You’re one to talk,” I said back, earning a wry smile.

“Yeah, I’m pretty shook.” She leaned against the railing and looked down at the ground below. “I always thought something bad happened to her. But to be honest, I never imagined it would be that heavy.”

“...Yeah, same here.”

I took another drag of my cigarette, letting out a puff of smoke before continuing.

“She only had one friend, and that friend passed away. And then her mother, who should’ve been the one closest to her, didn’t even have her back... That’d be hard for an adult, let alone a kid.”

“And she was only in her second year of high school...” Asami sighed. “...It was really brave of her to run away. No matter what it took.”

She gave me a sudden pat on the back.

“She deserved to meet somebody like you after fighting so hard, Yoshi.”

“What do you mean, *somebody like me*?” I asked, scowling.

Asami flashed me a self-satisfied smile and jabbed me meaningfully in my side with her elbow.

“Somebody who’d let a high school girl stay with them and not take advantage.”

“You’re so annoying. Knock it off...”

“I’m just hyping you up.” Asami snorted, before her expression suddenly went serious again. “So what are you going to do?”

“About what?” I replied. Asami looked taken aback.

“About Sasa, of course! Are you gonna give in and let her leave?”

“Her brother came to pick her up, so I don’t have any choice. It’s not my place to argue—none of this has anything to do with me.”

In truth, after hearing Sayu’s story, I’d started to seriously doubt that sending her home was the right choice.

That said, at the end of the day, it was none of my business. Now that Sayu's older brother—who was basically her guardian—had shown up, I didn't think there was anything more I could do.

"It has nothing to do with you, huh?" Asami was frowning. I tapped my cigarette on the ashtray and looked over at her.

"What?"

"Nooothering."

Asami smiled wryly and shot me another sidelong glance. Our eyes met.

"I just find it weird that you're still saying that, considering how involved you are."

"Well...I don't disagree with you, but...in the end, this is a family matter."

"I mean, sure. That'd be all well and good if her family actually stuck up for her."

I knew exactly what Asami was trying to say.

She was hoping I'd continue to support Sayu in some way.

But from an adult standpoint, it felt more than a little presumptuous to intrude any further into Sayu's life. Whatever the case may be, she needed to go back home eventually.

Now that time had come, and I had to deal with it whether I liked it or not. That was all there was to it, right?

"What do *you* want to do, Yoshi?"

Asami's sudden question caught me off guard.

"...Hey, didn't you hear what I just said? There's nothing I can—"

"I heard. But that's not what I'm asking," she said, cutting me off. "I don't care about what you should or shouldn't do." Asami looked me straight in the eyes. "I'm asking what you *want* to do."

I found myself unable to answer.

What did I want to do? I knew exactly what I wanted to do. But I didn't know whether it was *right*.

"You're making that face again." Asami reached out her hand and prodded my brow with her index finger. "You're overthinking things, aren't you?"

"...No, I'm not."

“You told me before you didn’t want to do something unless it was ‘*right*,’ remember?”

“...I remember.”

“Then what do you think is the ‘*right*’ thing to do in this situation, Yoshi?”

Her questions always seemed to hit me where it hurt, but I figured that was her intention.

“I—”

I was so focused on my conversation with Asami that my cigarette burned out. I pushed the stub—now mostly ash—into the tray and started to say something, but no words came out.

“I’m...”

Visions of Sayu bubbled up in my mind.

Sayu doing the laundry. Sayu cooking. Sayu idly whiling away the time after finishing the housework...

She always looked so peaceful—so natural.

She may have had a dark past buried deep inside her, but when she was around other people, she always had a smile on her face.

Her smile was so beautiful.

“I just...want her to keep that natural smile of hers.”

Before I knew it, the words had slipped out of my mouth.

Now that I thought about it, ever since she set foot in my apartment, that was all I cared about.

Sayu’s smile had charmed me.

There was never a doubt in my mind that the best thing for her was to smile and laugh like the child she was.

“In an ideal world...I’d want her to live happily with her family...to go to school like a normal student... That’d be my first priority, I think. But...”

Asami remained silent and listened to me.

“But...more than any of that, I want her to be able to smile naturally. I want her to smile like she did when she was here, even when I’m not around... I want her to keep that smile forever.”

For some reason, I could feel my chest tightening as I said this.

“That’s...what I want for her.”

The moment I finished speaking, I felt as if all the pressure in my chest had been lifted.

Asami stared at me for a few seconds, then let out a puff of air through her nose.

“Help her do that, then!” she replied before casting a glance over at Sayu, who was still sleeping inside.

“You and Sayu are anything but strangers now. You always seem to be thinking about what’s best for her, but...” Asami paused and looked back at me. “Isn’t it time you started thinking about what *you* want to do for her?”

“What *I* want to do...?” I echoed back. Asami nodded and continued.

“If you’re close enough, I think the right thing to do is to communicate about what you both want.”

“I guess that makes sense...” I grabbed another cigarette on reflex and lit it. It wasn’t until afterward that I realized what I had done.

“Oh, sorry. I just lit another one.”

“It’s fine, no biggie. You barely even smoked the last one,” she replied casually, leaning back against the balcony railing.

I stole a sideways glance at her and couldn’t help but laugh.

“What?” she asked, shooting me a disapproving look. I shook my head.

“Nah, it’s just...I sometimes forget you’re still in high school.”

“Huh? In what way?”

“I didn’t mean it as an insult. How do I put this...? To be frank, you’re pretty...mature for your age.”

I left it at that and placed my newly lit cigarette between my lips. I sucked in the smoke and exhaled.

Whenever I spoke with Asami, she always taught me some truth about something I hadn’t noticed. She had an undeniable aura of “the youth” about her, but at the same time, she often gave me the impression that she was, in some way or another, wise beyond her years.

As I was taking a few puffs of my cigarette and reflecting on Asami’s character, it occurred to me that she hadn’t said anything back after my remark.

I looked over to find her covering her mouth with the baggy sleeve of the sweatshirt she’d borrowed, looking down at the floor. She didn’t seem like

herself.

“Hey, what’s with you?”

“Shut up. I’m fine.”

“Ow!”

She’d kicked me along with her retort.

“I told you I wasn’t making fun of you.”

“That’s not the problem!”

“You just helped me clear my head a little... Ouch! Don’t kick me! What the hell?!”

“Shut up, boomer!”

I used my left hand—the one without my cigarette—to hold Asami back as she kicked me in the shins.

Then, all of a sudden, she stopped. After glancing up at me a few times, she muttered, “Keep your eyes on Sasa, okay...?”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“I mean exactly what I said! If I can help with anything, I will. So hit me up if you have any problems.”

“Okay...”

With that, she reached for the door leading back into the living room.

“I’m gonna call it a night. I’ll get these clothes washed and bring them back next time, okay?”

“Yeah. You sure you don’t want me to walk you?”

“I’ll be fine. You take care of Sasa.”

“Will do.”

Asami was now totally back to normal—smirk and all.

“I mean, she’s come this far, so things should work out one way or another.”

“...I hope so.”

“All right, then. See ya around.”

I watched as Asami walked back into the living room, gathered her belongings, and left.

Once she closed the door behind her, I looked down at the cigarette resting in my hand. This one had nearly burned down to the filter, too.

I sighed and stubbed it out in the ashtray.

As I was about to take out a third one, I stopped myself.

“...What do I want to do, huh?” I whispered, clenching my fists.

What did Sayu want to do?

What did I want to do?

Both things...were crucial.

With only one week left, I knew I had to put my all into figuring this out.

Chapter 8 Bat

“What? Sayu’s going home?”

“That’s so sudden...”

I briefed Hashimoto and Mishima—two of my colleagues familiar with the situation—during lunch break at the office. They were both even more shocked than I’d anticipated.

“Well, I guess these kinds of things *do* tend to be sudden...,” Hashimoto added quietly. “Maybe it’ll be better for the both of you if the situation goes back to normal.”

He paused there and shot me a glance from the side.

“...Going by your face, though, it seems you don’t agree.”

“Nah... It’s just...”

I could feel my brow furrowing and used my first two fingers to stretch the skin back out.

If Sayu’s family environment wasn’t so messed up, Hashimoto would have had a point. As he said, the current situation was hardly *normal*.

But based on what Sayu told us, I couldn’t imagine that going back to her family would do her any good.

“Are you worried you’ll miss her when she’s gone?”

Hashimoto asked this question with a serious face. He didn’t seem to be joking.

“No, that’s not the problem,” I answered, shaking my head. “It’s just... You can probably tell by how long she’s managed to stay away. Her parents are a little...”

“I see.”

Hashimoto, who was always good at reading between the lines, nodded definitively despite my vague explanation. He set aside his pork cutlet for a moment.

“But are things like that really your responsibility? At the end of the day, this is someone else’s family we’re talking about.”

“Yeah... You’re right. I thought that, too,” I replied with a nod.

Hashimoto looked me right in the eye. His expression was uncharacteristically serious.

“I think the time has come. Good intentions can only go so far. There’s a limit to how much you can do for a total stranger.”

I went silent. I didn’t exactly want to argue with what he was saying, and yet, I couldn’t bring myself to accept it. A strange sensation came over me. It felt like my emotions were smoldering inside my chest, ready to catch fire.

“So what do *you* want to do, Mr. Yoshida?” Mishima asked out of nowhere.

It was the same question Asami had posed to me the day before.

“I understand what Mr. Hashimoto’s saying—I really do—but when it comes down to it, you’re the one who met Sayu and let her stay with you all this time, right?” Mishima said as she went about removing the bones from her grilled salmon fillet.

She nimbly picked out a large one, then turned toward me.

“The way I see it, you’re no longer a total stranger. You’re involved in Sayu’s life now. You’ve been wrapped up in her problems for a while.”

This, too, echoed Asami’s sentiments from the previous day.

Mishima cocked her head and asked me once again.

“So what do you want to do?”

“I...”

I didn’t know what to say.

Ultimately, I wanted to do exactly what I’d told Asami a day ago: protect Sayu’s smile.

However, I knew Mishima’s question was more practical than that. She was asking what I was going to do about Sayu, now that she had to go back to Hokkaido in a week.

I still hadn't come up with any concrete plans.

I stayed quiet, and Mishima simply watched me as she brought a piece of salmon to her mouth, chewed slowly, then followed it with a bite of white rice. Once she'd swallowed down her food, she announced, "You still have a little less than a week left."

"Huh?"

"Until Sayu leaves."

"Oh... You're right."

After hearing my answer, Mishima nodded to herself a few times—as if thinking something over—then looked back at me.

"Do you mind if I borrow Sayu for the night, then?"

"Huh? Borrow her?"

Mishima's sudden proposal had me raising my voice like an idiot.

"That's right. Basically, I'm asking if I can take her out—on a girl-date."

"That's...no problem. Though Sayu will have to agree... But why now?"

"We need to have a woman-to-woman talk," Mishima replied, dismissing my suspicions with a wave of her hand.

I felt a little apprehensive about her sudden suggestion, but then I recalled the time Sayu had ended up at Mishima's place when she was supposed to be out shopping. Maybe the two of them shared a friendship I didn't know about.

"Well...if it's okay with Sayu, then it's okay with me."

"It's settled, then. I'll head home after work, then swing by your place to pick her up."

"Don't keep her out too late."

"I won't!" Mishima responded cheerfully before once again chowing down on her salmon.

As I blankly watched Mishima chew and swallow her food, I realized something.

She's stopped speaking with her mouth full, hasn't she?

*

"Here we go! First pitch of the day!"

Miss Yuzuha was in high spirits as she entered the batting cage, tightly gripping her bat.

A loud *thunk* rang through the air as a baseball flew from the wall. The pitch was slow enough that even an amateur like me could follow its trajectory, but it was still fast.

Miss Yuzuha swung the bat with all her might but completely missed the approaching ball.

“Whoops!” she exclaimed, turning to me and sticking out her tongue.

Another ball followed shortly after, and she took another swing. This time, the *thunk* was followed by the sharp *clink* of the bat making contact. The ball, however, went flying in the wrong direction.

“It’s been a while since I’ve tried this,” she muttered to herself before reverting into her batting stance and glaring in the direction of the next pitch.

It was nine PM, and Miss Yuzuha and I were at a batting cage.

As soon as Mr. Yoshida got home, he’d surprised me by announcing, “*Mishima wants to meet with you alone.*”

When I asked him why, he said he didn’t know.

She’d helped me out in the past many times, so I wasn’t opposed to going with her even without a reason. In fact, I was actually pretty happy about it.

After she came and picked me up from Mr. Yoshida’s apartment, Miss Yuzuha and I walked to the local train station, then went a little farther until we reached a rickety old batting cage.

I had no idea why she’d taken me to a batting cage of all places. She hadn’t said much so far; she was simply enjoying swinging her bat.

She would occasionally manage to make contact with the ball, but so far, none of her hits were likely to qualify as home runs.

Before we knew it, the balls stopped coming, and Miss Yuzuha stepped out of the cage with a strained smile on her face.

“Wow, I don’t remember being *this* bad. I used to knock ’em outta the park all the time.”

“Maybe you’re just rusty?”

“Probably.”

Miss Yuzuha pouted and let out a dispirited grumble. It was a cute expression, and it made me feel like I was hanging out with a friend my age rather than an adult woman.

“Okay! You’re up next, Sayu.”

“H-huh?” I sputtered as Miss Yuzuha offered me the bat. “Am I having a go, too?”

“Don’t you want to?”

“Well, sure. But...”

“Go on, then!” Miss Yuzuha said, shoving the bat into my hands. I was surprised by how heavy it was.

“Why don’t you try a couple of practice swings first?”

“Practice swings... L-like this?”

I tried to copy Miss Yuzuha, but the bat was so heavy, I felt like it was pulling my whole body around with it.

“If you swing with your arms, you’ll do your shoulders in. You need to focus on turning your hips. Here, like this.”

Miss Yuzuha got behind me and grabbed hold of my body to show me how I should move. I did as instructed, and it was obvious my center of gravity was much more stable than before.

After I’d done a couple of practice swings, Miss Yuzuha told me to get in the cage. She inserted some coins into the box outside and fiddled with the controls.

Then I heard the machine on the opposite wall whirl into action. It looked like the balls were about to start flying.

“Here we go!”

“Okay...!”

For some reason, I felt incredibly nervous.

The first ball flew toward me. It looked even slower than the balls Miss Yuzuha was hitting, but I was completely unable to time my swing and simply stood there, watching it shoot past me.

“C’mon, swing! You gotta swing! There aren’t any strikes in this game!” Miss Yuzuha teased in a silly voice.

“Okaaay...”

By the time I replied, another ball was headed my way.

This time, I swung as hard as I could, but I still missed.

“Close one!”

The same happened with the next ball and the one after that.

The baseballs blew past me at a steady rhythm, but I couldn’t so much as graze them with the bat.

I gradually grew frustrated.

Why could I never do anything right?

Another ball and then another breezed past me. I didn’t hit any of them.

“Last one!” Miss Yuzuha announced, and I snapped to attention.

The last one... At least let me hit this one.

I concentrated hard, staring intently at the ball’s trajectory.

Thunk! I heard the ball fire from the machine. For some reason, this one looked even slower than the one before.

I can hit it this time! I told myself and swung my bat as hard as I could.

Thump! I heard the final ball hit the backstop behind me.

“...Haah.” I sighed.

I missed the ball again.

I didn’t know why I was beating myself up over my poor batting—it wasn’t like I had much experience—but I felt strangely deflated. I slumped down on the ground where I’d been standing.

Before I knew it, my vision began to blur as tears welled up in my eyes.

Miss Yuzuha came straight over and placed a hand on my shoulder.

“...So you’ve gotta go back home, huh?”

“...Yeah.”

“And you don’t wanna?”

“...No.”

Her tone was so exceptionally gentle that I felt like I could tell her anything, no matter how childish.

“Do your shoulders hurt? Sorry I dragged you out here all of a sudden. I thought it’d help clear your head...but now look at you.”

“No, it’s all right...”

“Here, wipe your tears.”

Miss Yuzuha handed me her handkerchief. I shook my head and instead wiped my face on the sleeve of my top. She shot me a wry grin.

“Have a seat on the bench,” she said. “I’ll get us some drinks.”

Miss Yuzuha brought me out of the batting box and pointed to a nearby bench.

Then she smiled softly and said, “I’ll get us something hot and we can have a little chat.”

The warmth in her voice had a mysterious quality. It didn’t feel like she was compelling me to do anything, and yet, it was refreshingly firm. It was as if she was saying, “There’s no reason to refuse, is there?”

It was so disarming that before I knew it, I was nodding and saying yes.

The sense of crushing helplessness I’d felt while swinging the bat was already fading away.

Chapter 9 Family

Sipping at the hot cocoa Miss Yuzuha had bought me, I slowly explained my current situation.

Much like when we'd first met, she listened and chimed in with just the right amount of care. She was neither flippant nor overserious.

I told her about my family mixed with other stories about my past, but I avoided talking about Yuuko. No matter how sympathetic Miss Yuzuha was, I couldn't share a story that serious with just anyone. Besides, I didn't want to risk throwing up again in a place like this.

Every time I mentioned my mother, an inscrutable expression would come over Miss Yuzuha's face. Then, once I'd finished telling her everything, she placed her left hand over my right and squeezed it tightly.

"Y'know," she said, looking up at the ceiling of the batting cage, "I always thought family was supposed to love you unconditionally just because you're family. I thought that was just how it was...but I guess that's not always the case."

Her simple response left a dull pain in my chest.

I'd always vaguely known that was how family was supposed to be. I'd simply never experienced it for myself. My mother's hatred was obvious, and my brother was kind to me out of pity.

If anyone had ever given me unconditional love, it wasn't my family. Instead, it was...

"Mr. Yoshida and I probably look like a father and daughter."



I spoke suddenly and without thinking, and Miss Yuzuha's eyes went wide. A moment later, she burst out laughing.

"Ah-ha-ha! So that's it!"

Miss Yuzuha roared with laughter, then nodded emphatically several times.

"Right. Family... Now I understand..."

"Wh-what?"

"Nothing. It's just...that thought never occurred to me," she said, smirking. "You two have been so close since the day you met, even though you didn't know much about each other. Somehow you both needed each other."

Miss Yuzuha slowly articulated her thoughts. It sounded more like she was talking to herself than to me.

"But your relationship wasn't sexual...so I was having a hard time understanding what exactly the connection was. But yeah, it makes sense now... If you tried to become family with someone you just met...that's probably exactly how it would go."

Miss Yuzuha's words made me realize something.

Time and again, I'd wondered what made Mr. Yoshida different from the other men I'd met. It was strange—I'd felt comfortable around him almost immediately. That was something I hadn't experienced with any of the others, and I'd never worked out why.

But now, Miss Yuzuha had opened my eyes to the kind of relationship Mr. Yoshida and I had built.

"Oh... So Mr. Yoshida cared for me like family... That's why..."

From the moment I left home, I was only ever seen as a "woman." People wanted me to be a "high school girl," so that's the role I played. No... I'd assumed that's what they wanted and molded myself to fit.

Mr. Yoshida, however, only ever saw me as a "child." It was peculiar yet comforting...

"That's why...he was so kind..."

Tears instantly began to gather at the corners of my eyes. I wasn't sad, but I could feel my emotions swelling.

I must have spent those six months wandering around in desperation because, deep down, I was looking for unconditional love.

“Why is...Mr. Yoshida like that...?” I asked, my voice nasal as I wiped at the tears streaming down my face.

Miss Yuzuha snorted.

“I don’t know, either... He’s different, that guy.” Abruptly, she placed a hand on my head and mussed my hair. “But...I’m really glad you two met.”

I could feel my vision distorting.

I squeezed my eyes closed and nodded silently.

I was glad that I’d met Mr. Yoshida, too.

Those were my true feelings.

And that...was exactly why I was so terrified.

“Are you scared of leaving him?” Miss Yuzuha asked, as if reading my mind.

I looked up at her and nodded. I no longer felt any need to keep up appearances around her.

“I’m scared... Really scared.”

“That makes sense... He’s more of a parent than your real mom has ever been, and now you’re leaving him.” She nodded a few times. When she spoke again, her voice was deliberate. “But...you and he aren’t family.”

“...I know.”

“And because of that...,” she murmured, “this is a tricky one.”

Her words cut straight to my heart and yet resonated with me deeply.

Suddenly, it dawned on me.

I’d been thinking of “going home” and “leaving Mr. Yoshida” as the same thing, and both ideas petrified me.

“...I don’t want to go home.”

Once again, I’d spoken before I knew what I was saying.

Miss Yuzuha ruffled my hair a second time.

“...Yeah, I understand,” she agreed, her voice kind.

We both went quiet for a few minutes. I sniffled and wiped away my tears, and all the while, Miss Yuzuha kept stroking my head.

“When it’s time to make a decision,” she began, unprompted, “we always want to put it off. I think that’s just human nature.”

Her words sounded gentle, and they gradually sank in.

“But as it turns out, the more important the decision, the less likely you are to have that kind of time. You can hem and haw over the details, but before you know it, time is up.”

She moved the hand resting on top of my head down to my shoulder and gave it a soft pat.

“I can only say this because I’m an outsider,” Miss Yuzuha continued. I lifted my face and met her gaze. She looked very serious. “But you can’t run away anymore, Sayu. I think it’s time for you to make a decision.”

Her words were so kind, I didn’t understand why she’d felt the need to make a disclaimer. She hardly sounded like an *outsider*.

“I know you’re scared. If I were in your shoes...I’d be absolutely terrified.” Miss Yuzuha took my hand in hers. “But you’re not alone anymore.”

I felt my whole body tremble as she said this.

I wasn’t alone.

That thought took root and spread all through me.

“You’ve got Mr. Yoshida,” she continued.

This warmed my heart even more.

She was right. I had Mr. Yoshida now.

Leaving him was scary, but he would give me the strength to make that choice. And...

“...It might sound like I’m trying to stay out of this, but...I’ve got your back, too.”

“I know... I know.”

I felt like I was about to cry again, and I desperately tried to keep my face still and hold back the tears. I was too embarrassed to cry any more than I already had.

It went without saying that Miss Yuzuha had my back. If she didn’t support me, she never would have offered me such kind words of encouragement.

She scratched the tip of her nose with her right hand.

“You probably already know this,” she said, “but I’m gonna say it anyway...”

It sounded like she was having a little more trouble getting her words out now.

“I...um...have a thing for Mr. Yoshida. I’m in love with him.”

“...I know.”

“Uhhh, right, yeah... That’s why I felt a bit conflicted when I first found out about you... Like, um...” Miss Yuzuha scratched her head, blushing slightly as she continued. “Even now...I still feel the same. I know I just said you guys are like family, but to be honest...your bond seems much deeper than that. At least, that’s how it looks to me. That’s why... Hmm, this is a little difficult.”

Miss Yuzuha looked over at me, but I couldn’t read her expression.

“I think from my standpoint, it’d be best if you just went home already.”

“...No beating around the bush, huh?”

“Ha-ha... Sorry. But that...isn’t the only reason I’m telling you this.”

“I know,” I said with a nod.

Miss Yuzuha flashed me an awkward smile, then carried on.

“I can’t bring myself to dislike you, Sayu. You’re honest, you’re determined, and you have such a cute smile.”

I felt my cheeks grow hot.

“Ultimately, I doubt anything I’m saying right now is really for your sake, but...”

Miss Yuzuha paused and blew out a puff of air. The words that followed were slow and steady.

“I can’t help but love you, Sayu. That’s why I want you to keep fighting...so that things will get better. I want you to live your life to the fullest.”

“...Okay.”

“It’ll be all right. You have people by your side now.”

“.....Okay.”

Despite my best efforts, tears started pouring from my eyes.

I ran away from my emotions. I ran away from my mom. I spent my life running away.

And yet, as hard as it was, I was still glad all that running had brought me here.

For the first time, I felt like my life wasn't all one big mistake.

"Ungh..."

"Oh no. Your face is a mess again..."

"I can't help it..."

Unable to stop my tears, I decided to accept Miss Yuzuha's handkerchief after all.

*

"Oh, welcome back."

When I brought Sayu back to Mr. Yoshida's apartment, he came to the door with his eyes all puffy and swollen.

"...Don't tell me you were asleep?"

"Yeah... Just a short nap."

He didn't have to answer. It was clear from his face that he had just gotten out of bed, and I couldn't help laughing. He was probably exhausted after everything that had happened with Sayu over the past few days.

"Don't just stand there. Come in."

I was a little hurt to see Mr. Yoshida invite Sayu in instead of me, but I forced myself to squash those negative feelings.

After shamelessly crying my eyes out at home last time, I'd made a decision.

I was no longer going to be jealous of their relationship. This wasn't lip service or some kind of compromise—it was an important measure to preserve my mental health.

As I'd told Sayu earlier, for whatever reason, I already felt great empathy for her. She was such a good girl, and taking into account what I had just heard, I really wanted her to be happy in the future.

Both that sentiment and my jealousy over Sayu and Mr. Yoshida's relationship existed in my mind simultaneously, and I knew all too well that if I didn't suppress one of the two, I'd only cause myself anguish.

"C'mon, you'll catch cold. Warm up and go to bed," I told Sayu, pushing her forward into the apartment.

Then I casually raised a hand to wave good-bye, avoiding looking at them together as much as I could.

“Okay, I’m going home. See you tomorrow... I mean, next week,” I corrected myself, realizing that it was Friday.

For some reason, Mr. Yoshida looked like he was considering something. Then he turned toward me.

“Why don’t you come in if you’ve got a few minutes to spare? You... walked Sayu back, after all. The least I can do is offer you a coffee.”

I felt my heart soar at his words but managed to hold back.

If I took him up on his offer, I’d only end up with an even closer look at how the two of them acted around each other. I had to tread carefully.

“Nah, I’m sure you’re both totally worn out. I’ll pass today.”

“All right... At least let me walk you to the station, then. It can get a little deserted around here.”

This offer was more than I could’ve hoped for.

I paused for a beat, then replied, “Okay, if you insist.”

“Make sure you lock the door,” he advised Sayu.

Then he threw on a heavy jacket over his pajamas and stepped outside. I knew he would look strange walking beside me in this getup while I was dressed for a day out, but I was happy nonetheless.

“The nights have gotten a little chilly lately,” I said.

“Yeah,” he replied. “It’s gonna be winter before we know it.”

Mr. Yoshida wrapped his arms around his chest and pretended to shiver.

Winter was coming, and soon the year would be over. Next year, Sayu would turn eighteen. All her peers would be graduating from high school in just a few months’ time.

Sayu, however, had completely missed the latter half of her second year and was now skipping her third. I wasn’t sure whether they’d let her graduate like that.

“I wonder if things will be okay for Sayu once she goes home,” I said hesitantly.

Mr. Yoshida was quiet for a moment.

The sounds of our footsteps slowly disappeared into the night air.

“I want to support her...so that she can have a normal life,” Mr. Yoshida said, breaking his silence, “but there’s not much I can actually do. I have my own life to live.”

“...That’s true.”

“Whether or not she can face the problems ahead...is all up to her.”

On the surface, Mr. Yoshida sounded even more matter-of-fact than usual. Once I got a look at his face, however, I could tell he was only expressing his own feelings of inadequacy—he was being his usual self after all.

Anyone would feel the same, I thought. But then I changed my mind. *No, they wouldn’t.*

Other people would consider someone else when it was convenient, then push them away and disregard their issues as “someone else’s problem” when the chips were down. That was just the way adults were—or at least, that’s how it seemed to me.

But Mr. Yoshida was different. When he took Sayu in, he felt responsible for her, and now he was trying to do what was needed to the best of his ability. There was something incredibly attractive about that, which, once again, made me feel conflicted.

But strangely, I had absolutely no desire to come between him and Sayu.

Perhaps that was because the bond the two of them shared was so undeniable—I knew it wasn’t something I could break.

I decided to speak honestly.

“Sayu...definitely needs you,” I said. Mr. Yoshida looked at me in surprise.

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. She may seem mature, but deep down, she’s still a child. I think all the strength she’s squeezed out of that tiny body came straight from you.”

“...You think so, huh?”

I thought he would be modest and shake his head in denial. Instead, he simply accepted what I’d said.

“...What can I do for her, though?” he asked.

It seemed like that was all he was worried about now.

I thought staying by Sayu's side would be enough, but I got the impression such a vague answer wasn't what he was looking for.

Instead, I put on a cheery voice and very casually made a suggestion.

"Why don't you go along with her to Hokkaido?"

"Huh?" he responded, clearly dumbfounded. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Surely it's not *that* shocking an idea. She says she doesn't have the courage to go back alone. But if you go with her, she might feel a little braver."

"No way. Her family would freak out. Wouldn't that be crossing a line? I'm a total stranger. Besides, how would the office cope without me?"

"Screw all that *stranger* nonsense. You're already in it this deep! ...And as for work, I'm sure Mr. Hashimoto, Mr. Endou, and Mr. Koike could put their heads together and figure something out. It's only a week, after all... And you've got your trusty junior right here, haven't you?"

I puffed out my chest to prove my point. Mr. Yoshida's face went blank, and he stopped talking for a few moments. Then he burst out laughing.

"*Trusty*, my ass..." he said, but made no further comments about my proposal.

Still, I got the feeling he was considering it. If he wasn't going to come up with the idea himself, I figured it had been worth mentioning.

I wanted Sayu to be happy no matter what, too. But there wasn't a lot I could do to help her.

What's more...I wanted Mr. Yoshida to recognize what Sayu truly meant to him. Did he love her like a child or was it something more?

If those feelings were still unresolved when he parted ways with her, he would definitely come to regret it.

Personally, I hated having regrets, and I didn't want the people I cared about to have them, either.

Sure, I may have had romantic feelings for him, but I genuinely wanted things to end happily for the two of them, no matter what that looked like.

"Mr. Yoshida...do your best," I said.

"Okay," he replied a few seconds later.

Then he quietly added something else.

"Thanks."

For now, that was enough.

As our conversation trailed off, the coldness of the air suddenly hit me. Shivering, I looked up at the night sky.

It was still only the beginning of fall, and yet, I felt like winter was nearly upon us.

Chapter 10 Recollection

The next day was Saturday.

Sayu usually got up much earlier than I did, but that day, she slept in. She was probably tired after staying out so late with Mishima the night before.

Even when she stayed in bed, the sound of me getting up was usually enough to wake her—a common occurrence on weekends. This time, however, the creaking of my bed had no effect, and Sayu carried on sleeping soundly in her futon, her breathing even.

Her expression was peaceful, so I didn't think she was having a nightmare. That reassured me somewhat.

I looked at the clock: It was just past ten AM.

I gingerly got out of bed and headed for the kitchen. I'd just woken up, but my stomach already felt empty.

As I was checking the fridge, the doorbell suddenly rang, startling me.

In a panic, I looked over at Sayu. But not even that had been enough to wake her.

Relieved, I headed into the entryway and opened the door.

"Yes? What do you—? Oh."

"Sorry to bother you."

Sayu's brother, Issa, was standing at the door.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"No, I was just wondering how Sayu was holding up...and I had some business with you."

"Me?" I asked, stepping out of the apartment for a moment and shutting the door behind me. "Sayu's sleeping like a log in there—she's probably tired. So we'd better take this conversation outside."

Issa nodded, then stared at me for a moment and asked, “Have you had breakfast yet? If you’d like, we could go get some now. There’s something I want to discuss.”

I had no particular reason to turn down this offer.

“Sure. Just give me a second to get dressed.”

I rushed back inside and changed out of my pajamas as quietly as I could. I heard Sayu turn in her sleep a few times, but she didn’t wake up.

I deliberated over whether to shave my beard but decided against it, thinking the sound of the electric razor would probably disturb Sayu.

Then I shoved my wallet and phone in my pocket and left the apartment.

*

“Choose whatever you’d like. It’s on me.”

“O-okay...”

I self-consciously scratched my stubbly chin. I hadn’t expected him to drive me to an expensive French restaurant. I knew I should’ve shaved.

The menu was almost unintelligible to me, but eventually I found something I thought I might like and ordered it.

Soon after, a waiter brought over our premeal drinks. As soon as I started sipping at mine, Issa launched into the conversation.

“First of all, I’d like to express my sincere apologies once again for my extremely distasteful choice of words last time we met.”

He suddenly lowered his head in a bow.

“No, please don’t apologize,” I responded, flustered. “It’s fine, really.”

“It’s not... That was an incredibly rude thing to say to someone who has treated my little sister with such kindness.”

“No, no. I was actually pleased to see you were so worried about her,” I replied.

Issa lifted his head and stared at me. A relaxed smile spread across his face. It reminded me a little of Sayu’s.

“You’re certainly an intriguing individual... I can’t imagine any other man your age taking in a high school girl only to start seeing her as his own daughter. Can you?”

“...I find it harder to believe an adult would approach a high school girl for her body.”

“I feel the same.” Issa nodded, taking a sip of his drink. He seemed genuinely relieved. “It’s quite fortunate that Sayu was able to find someone like you.”

“I don’t think I’m all tha—”

“I’m not exaggerating.”

He was smiling, but I could see his expression clouding over.

“If she hadn’t met you and stayed on the run, ‘paying her way’ as she went...she would have lost her faith in other people...” Issa stopped there and looked straight at me. “She would have been hurt in ways that would never heal. She might have carried that burden for the rest of her life.”

The last time I saw Issa, I didn’t ask him anything about this subject. But going by what he’d just said, I could tell that he knew all about the path Sayu had taken to get here.

“Sayu really did meet you just in the nick of time.”

“I’m honored you would say so...but, I mean, I didn’t do anything special... In the end, I kind of just helped her maintain the status quo... If you hadn’t shown up, I think I would’ve let her keep running away indefinitely.”

Issa let out a short sigh and smiled a little, then cocked his head to one side.

“Um... This may seem unimportant, but I’d still like to ask,” he said. “Why are you...so kind to Sayu? I would understand if you thought she was cute and desired her...and so you acted nice as a front, but...”

In other words, he was asking me why I was being kind, despite not wanting to date her or sleep with her.

“Why did you feel the need to treat a high school runaway you met by chance with such kindness?” he asked again.

I sucked in a deep breath.

I didn’t have a clear answer for that myself.

Why had I let her stay with me in the first place?

“That day...I was drunk.”

The words came out one by one as I tried to put my mind in order.

“This is embarrassing, but I’d been rejected, and my heart was broken...” I said, chuckling to myself. “I drowned my sorrows in alcohol, and on my way home, I came across Sayu.”

Issa listened with a serious expression. I didn’t think what I was saying deserved such earnest attention, but I wasn’t about to poke fun at him for it.

“She was crouching down on the side of the road. I started lecturing her—who knows who I thought I was—but all she said was... *‘If you let me stay over, I’ll let you do me.’*”

Issa gulped. Just in case he’d gotten the wrong idea, I made sure to clarify by saying, “Of course, I refused her offer.”

He nodded a few times, then let out a sigh of relief.

“But I...let her stay anyway.”

That’s right. For some reason or other, I’d still brought her home with me.

Back then...I never would have imagined we’d end up living together for so long.

“...I don’t know why. I wonder what got into me.”

One by one, the memories came flooding back.

I’d been drinking, so the images were hazy, but I tried desperately to pull them together.

I could remember the deserted nighttime road and the vague glow of the streetlamp. And crouching beneath it, a high school girl.

Her skirt was a little short, exposing her black panties.

“Hey, you over there. Schoolgirl...”

The girl had cast me a vacant glance when I called out to her.

There had been little warmth in her expression.

I gulped.

“...I guess I really am trash,” I suddenly said to Issa.

He cocked his head in confusion. “What do you mean?”

I forced a smile and replied, “I was just running through that day in my head.”

I’d had my heart broken, got wasted, and with my mind in a muddle, I found Sayu.

“She looked up at me when I called out to her. I just remembered...the look on her face.”

Issa said nothing and listened.

I remembered thinking that if someone caught me chatting with a high school girl, I'd get in trouble.

That, however, was nothing more than an excuse.

I...

"...Her face under the lamplight...was so beautiful," I said.

Issa sucked in a small breath.

That was only natural. This statement contradicted everything I'd told him up to that point.

Even I was surprised. But that didn't make it any less true. This was the reality I'd refused to acknowledge for so long.

"I was heartbroken and lonely...and then this beautiful high school girl appeared before my eyes... I let my guard down."

I'd always had my doubts about that night.

My moral compass should have stopped me from bringing home a high school girl, even if I did happen to be drunk. So why had I done it?

I'd known I was committing a crime, too.

It wasn't until the next day that I found out about Sayu's background and started empathizing with her.

That first day, I should've had no reason to let her stay with me.

But now I knew. I had been motivated by a simple, stupid, shitty feeling I'd repressed.

"No matter how righteous I pretend to be...I probably let her stay with me because I thought she was cute," I admitted with a sigh. "Ugh... I really am a piece of shit," I muttered. Then, for some reason, a laugh escaped my lips.

Issa took in my expression, baffled.

Before I had the chance to think it through, I said, "Now that I've figured it out...it's like a huge weight has lifted."

Issa stared blankly at me for a few seconds, then burst out laughing.

"Ha-ha!"

"Huh? What's so funny...?"

After chuckling to himself for a moment, he replied, "It's just...I can't believe how honest you are." He laughed so hard that he had to wipe a few

tears from the corners of his eyes. “What kind of person would admit something like that now? As an adult, you must know it will only hurt you.”

His words were accusatory, but they clearly weren’t driven by hate or disgust.

“And yet, you just came out and said it. How ridiculously honest...”

Unsure of how best to reply to this, I simply scratched the back of my neck.

“I think that’s fine,” Issa clarified. “Cute girls are every man’s weakness. Besides, you’re much more likable than the guys who talk big, only to hide what they’re really after. And...”

He paused and looked straight at me.

Our eyes met. After a few seconds, he abruptly smiled and went on.

“You may have taken her in because of those feelings, but you didn’t lay a hand on her. That’s very significant... Even more significant than you think.”

This comment stirred something in the pit of my stomach.

What am I doing?

Is it right?

Those thoughts had been on my mind ever since Sayu moved in with me.

Now, it was as if my decision had been affirmed by someone who’d cared about her since the beginning.

I felt the corners of my eyes grow hot but held back my tears. This was no place to start bawling.

“Heh-heh, I see... So you let her stay with you because she’s cute! Ha-ha-ha.”

Issa chuckled, remembering again what I’d said.

“I guess that makes you a scumbag, too,” he said. The words were an accusation, but his tone made it clear he was just teasing me.

I nodded and started chuckling myself.

“Yeah... No doubt about that.”

“But if she had to meet a scumbag that day, I’m glad it was you, Mr. Yoshida... I mean it.”

He paused, and his face abruptly grew serious.

Then he sucked in a breath, as if he’d made up his mind about something.

“...Ever since Sayu was little, our parents never loved her,” he said, looking me in the eye. This was probably an unspoken show of trust.

He was implying that he was about to disclose a part of Sayu’s past she hadn’t told me.

“...Would you mind telling me a bit more about that?” I asked earnestly, letting him know I understood his intent.

Issa nodded, then slowly began his story.

As I had assumed, Sayu’s father was the president and CEO of Ogiwara Foods. Their mother had worked at his company, and though Issa seemed unsure exactly how the two got to know each other, they met and eventually married.

Their mother quit her job to become a housewife, and not long after, she had Issa.

At that time, their mother was the happiest she had ever been, and Issa was raised in an extremely loving environment. However, that happy period lasted for only a few years.

It seemed their father had a penchant for cheating and always had an eye out for good-looking women. According to Issa, their mother was strikingly attractive, which was probably the only reason his father had married her. His assessment elicited a wry smile from me.

I could easily imagine how the story went from there, but Issa dutifully continued.

Their father steadily lost interest in their mother, but he would still spend the occasional night with her—as if suddenly remembering she existed.

“That was when our mother became pregnant with Sayu,” Issa explained.

The look on his face bore notes of both joy and sorrow. I figured he was experiencing those same conflicting emotions on the inside, too.

“But our father didn’t love her anymore,” he said flatly, his voice ringing cold. “And she understood that.”

When their father found out their mother was pregnant with another child, he initially suggested she have an abortion. As sad as that was, it seemed like the natural choice. No one would expect a woman to raise the child of a man who didn’t love her.

And yet, their mother refused. To her, this second child was the last chance she had to hold on to their father. She was truly in love with him.

She disregarded her husband's objections, and Sayu was born.

"As a result...he walked out on her. He remarried, though I don't know how well that's going, considering his nature..."

His nature—a hopeless cheater with a weakness for pretty faces. Issa spoke matter-of-factly, as if resigned to it all.

"Our mother thought Sayu would cement her relationship with our father, but in the end, she became proof that he didn't love her. I expect Sayu's already told you the rest herself."

I was unable to respond.

Sayu had told me only how terribly her mother treated her. But now that I'd heard this part of the story, I couldn't bring myself to simply criticize the woman.

And to be honest, Sayu's father sounded like a real bastard. But that didn't mean he was totally to blame for her mother's lack of affection, either.

A myriad of circumstances and emotions had converged to burden Sayu with this despair.

"...It sounds so hopeless," I finally managed to say.

Issa didn't need words to show me he agreed.

"Sayu was such an innocent child. She had an adorable smile and was full of life. Despite that, our mother refused to love her. Once Sayu was old enough to realize that, she more or less stopped smiling around her."

Issa clenched his fist on top of the table.

"To me...that was the saddest part." His face was full of anguish. "I wanted to show Sayu I loved her, even if I was the only one. I really wanted to do that for her. But..."

Issa let out a deep breath and shook his head.

"I wasn't enough. I could always tell how lonely she was." He slowly closed his eyes. "...Children need their parents' love."

His words resonated deeply with me.

Growing up, I'd received constant love from my parents. I had no idea how it would feel to be raised without that affection.

The thought of growing up in a household where you were not only unloved but also seen as an enemy by your own mother was horrible even to imagine.

Who else but their parents could children rely on while growing up?

“In that sense,” Issa said, looking over at me, “Mr. Yoshida...you might be the closest thing to a parent Sayu has ever had.”

He offered me another deep bow.

“...Thank you so very much...for caring for her.”

“No, there’s no need—”

Just as I was about to ask him to lift his head, I noticed his shoulders were trembling and held my tongue. He immediately took a handkerchief from his pocket and patted the tears from his eyes.

“Excuse me.”

“No... It’s all right.”

Issa was truly thinking about Sayu’s best interests—that was clear from the sincerity in his voice.

He obviously cared about her, and he wanted to take her back to her family home. The thought of stopping him vanished from my mind, regardless of what would happen afterward.

But I still wanted to prioritize Sayu’s feelings.

“I don’t think Sayu...is ready to go home yet. I...want to encourage her in any way I can, but...from what I’ve heard, her home doesn’t sound like a place she’d particularly want to return to.”

I chose my words with the utmost care. I wanted to avoid being blunt while not being overly euphemistic, either. Issa slowly nodded in agreement.

“I feel the same. But...the longer she drags this out, the worse our mother will treat her when she eventually comes back. At any rate, Sayu’s a minor, and she needs to be at home.”

“...You’re right.”

According to Issa, the PTA had begun to worry about Sayu’s safety. If it got out that she’d been on the run for more than six months without anyone knowing her whereabouts, it was sure to become a major issue.

Were that to happen, things wouldn’t end well for me, either.

I could proudly declare that I'd done nothing immoral all I wanted, but in the eyes of the law, I was clearly in the wrong.

Taking that into consideration, it would be irresponsible of me to say something like, "I'll keep her at my place anyway!" Issa would never let that happen, either.

"...Please take good care of Sayu for the few days she has left," Issa said with feeling.

"...I will."

I nodded solemnly.

Just as our conversation came to an end, the waiter brought over our meals.

The look on Issa's face immediately changed, and he grinned at me.

"All right, let's stop all this depressing talk and eat. The food here is always delicious, no matter what you order."

"Well, if you insist... Thank you for the meal," I replied brightly, not wanting to drag the bleak atmosphere out any longer.

I'd ordered some kind of pasta and tomato sauce with a name I didn't understand. From the very first bite, it was obvious the food was on a whole different level from your regular chain-restaurant offerings.

Recalling how hungry I had been when I woke up that morning, I devoured the pasta with gusto.

*

"Good-bye, then. I'll see you again when I come to pick up Sayu."

"I'll do what I can to help her until then."

Once we'd finished our meal, Issa drove me back home.

We exchanged casual farewells, and then Issa took off. I watched until his car disappeared out of sight, then went back into my apartment.

When I unlocked the front door and walked inside, I found Sayu sitting upright in the living room.

"Welcome back. Where have you been?" she said, staring at me.

I thanked her for the welcome, took off my shoes, and stepped into the living room.

“I went for a fancy French breakfast with your brother.”

Sayu’s eyes went wide at my response, but all she said was, “Oh, I see.”

“Did you just wake up?”

“Y-yeah... Sorry, I slept for way too long.”

“No need to apologize. It’s the weekend, after all.”

“Yeah...,” she replied half-heartedly, then fell silent.

It didn’t feel right to wear my outside clothes at home, so I quickly changed into something more comfortable.

I recalled how nerve-racking I’d found it to get changed in front of Sayu when she first arrived. Recently, I’d become totally used to it.

Once I had my pajamas on, Sayu started to speak again.

“...Did my brother say something to you?”

“What kind of something?” I asked.

She looked down at the floor, troubled.

“Just...you know, something.”

She looked so cute, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“He wasn’t bad-mouthing you or anything, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Yeah, he’s...not really that type of guy.”

“Actually, I got the impression that he really loves you.”

“Love—?! Th-that’s, well...” This got Sayu flustered, and her face turned bright red. Then her voice went quiet, and she nodded. “Yeah... He cares about me a lot.”

“You probably shouldn’t have cut off contact with someone who cares so much about you... Though I understand how you must’ve felt.”

“Yeah...I’ve already thought over that a lot.”

I could see Sayu’s spirits dampen. *I probably shouldn’t have started lecturing her*, I thought. There was no point reiterating something she already knew all too well.

“...Hey, are you still feeling scared?” I asked.

Sayu lowered her gaze and nodded slowly.

“...Yeah, I’m terrified.”

“Well...that makes sense,” I said, acknowledging her apprehension. It was only natural for her to feel that way.

“I don’t think...the day will ever come when I won’t be afraid to go back there.”

“...You’re probably right.”

“But...”

Sayu suddenly glanced up at me. The look in her eyes was somehow reassuring, and I couldn’t bring myself to turn away.

“...I know I have to go home.”

“...Okay.”

I wasn’t sure how that statement made me feel, so I kept my reply vague.

“I just need to make sure I’m ready... That’s all. But...” Her voice began to quiver slightly. “It’s still...so scary.”

“...I bet.”

Sayu seemed much more comfortable expressing her feelings now than when she had first come to stay with me.

That was definitely a change for the better, and it made me happy.

I felt like Sayu had changed in all sorts of ways since she started living with me. Was it growth or regression? That was probably a question only Sayu could answer. But what I did know was that something deep down inside her was different now. It would be wonderful if her life improved as a result.

What could I do for her with the last few days we had left together?

I gazed at Sayu as I thought this through. She swiftly looked up and locked eyes with me.

“But for now, I’ll just keep up what I’ve been doing,” she said.

The anxiety in her words a moment earlier had disappeared, and she seemed in high spirits, like her mood had been reset.

“I’ll put my all into the housework and my part-time job. And when I’m done with those, I’ll loaf around and chat with Asami if she comes by...”

She paused, and a peaceful look came over her. I found myself captivated by it.

“I want to enjoy my day-to-day life here,” she said. “The things I can’t experience anywhere else...for the short time I have left.”

I felt a pang in my chest at her last few words.

We'd always known our life together came with a time limit, but it was still painful for me to acknowledge.

"Let me know if there's anything you want to eat, Mr. Yoshida. I'll try my best to make it for you!"

"Y-yeah..."

I nodded, trying not to put a damper on Sayu's enthusiasm.

"All right. If I think of anything, I'll let you know right away."

"You'd better!"

She nodded vigorously, then stood up.

"Okay, I've stayed in bed for way too long. It's time to get started with the laundry!" she declared, pumping herself up before making her way over to the washing machine.

I felt a strange, profound sadness come over me as I watched her go.

Chapter 11 Proof

My days with Sayu seemed to go by in a flash.

I made sure to leave work right on time and spend as long as possible talking with her once I was home.

Sayu put even more effort into her cooking than usual, and every single meal was delicious.

“I’ll leave a notebook with all my recipes for you,” she told me. “You should cook for yourself from time to time.”

I thanked her and nodded, not allowing myself to dwell on how unreal the idea of Sayu leaving felt to me.

Sayu was going back to Hokkaido in just a few days.

Ever since her brother had invited me out to breakfast the previous Saturday, I’d fought the impulse to ask if she was ready to go home yet. Sayu likewise avoided the topic.

I felt like I was especially cherishing each day of our last week together. I couldn’t tell how Sayu felt, but I convinced myself that she was probably the same.

“Um, hey. There’s somewhere I want to go today,” Sayu said abruptly in the middle of dinner. I put down my chopsticks for a moment.

“What, now?” I asked, and she nodded.

“There’s no other time we can go,” she replied, then got straight up from her seat and pushed open the window curtain to look at the sky.

“...Oh, good. It’s clear tonight.”

“Hmm?”

I had no idea what she was getting at, but Sayu flashed me a big grin.

“Wanna go see the stars?” she asked.

“The stars?”

“Yeah. I know a place with a really beautiful view of them. Asami showed it to me.”

“Oh...was that where you two went before dinner last night?”

“Yep! She took me there once before, but I couldn’t really remember the way, so...” Sayu pulled her phone out of her pocket. “I got her to take me back so I could mark the location.” She opened a map on her phone and showed me.

It sounded like she’d gone to a lot of trouble. Did she want to show me the stars that badly?

“...Okay, then. We’ll go after dinner.”

I nodded, and Sayu returned the gesture, smiling cheerfully.

“Great!”

Now that I thought about it, I could remember looking up at the stars on my way home from evening practice sessions with my school club and thinking about how clearly you could see them.

Since growing up and moving here, however, I’d never taken the time to notice the stars.

I was a little excited to find out what kind of night sky Sayu would show me.

After we finished dinner and I smoked a cigarette, we left the apartment together.

“Is it close enough to walk?”

“It’s a little far, but we can definitely walk there. I think it’ll take about twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes? Well, it’ll be good exercise after eating, at least.”

I glanced at my watch and saw it was just past eight PM.

Even if we took our time looking at the stars, we’d still get back at a reasonable hour, so there was no need to worry.

“I’m surprised we can still see the stars, even where the streetlamps are so bright,” Sayu remarked casually, drawing my attention toward the sky.

Sure enough, she was right. There was hardly a cloud in sight, and the stars shone beautifully.

“You’re right. I never really noticed,” I replied.

Sayu snickered.

“When I first came to Tokyo,” she continued, “I remember thinking that you couldn’t really see the stars here.”

“You mean...compared to Hokkaido?”

“Yeah,” Sayu quietly agreed. “The stars were so beautiful there. It was almost obnoxious.”

Sayu’s gaze seemed far away as she said this. She must have been thinking of the past. Hokkaido’s starry skies...and the other things she saw there.

“But that’s the sky I was used to, ever since I was a little kid, so I was surprised when I came here. I didn’t know there were places where the stars were so hard to see.”

“Huh.”

My vague response wasn’t due to a lack of interest. I just thought it would be for the best if I kept my emotions in check.

“Soon, I stopped caring about stuff like that, though. After a while, all I thought about was how I could stay on the move. I quickly adjusted to city life and forgot all about the stars.”

“...Huh.”

Sayu’s voice held little emotion. I stole a glance at her from the side, but she didn’t seem particularly distressed.

Perhaps she’d already written off the painful path she’d taken here as a thing of the past. If she hadn’t, I didn’t think she’d be able to talk about it so easily.

Whatever the case, she’d already put one foot forward.

She wasn’t going to stay trapped in the past any longer, letting it hold her back. She was about to face the future.

As I watched her from the side, lost in thought, Sayu suddenly looked up at me.

“That’s why I was so amazed when Asami showed me this place... I couldn’t believe there was somewhere in the city where you could see the stars so clearly.”

As I walked along listening to her, I noticed we'd left my usual stretch of neighborhood.

"I realized you *can* see the stars in the city—you've just got to be in the right place."

We were probably only ten minutes away from my apartment.

And yet, despite having lived in the area for so many years, I'd already lost track of where we were.

I went to the office, did my job, and when I was done, I came back home and slept. Caught up in that grind, I'd never realized there was a place where you could see the stars within walking distance of my home.

"Mr. Yoshida."

"Yes?" I replied, looking over at Sayu.

Her gaze remained fixed in the direction we were walking.

Despite this, I could sense that her attention was actually on me.

"No matter where I go...", she said, her voice quiet, "I don't think anything really changes."

My breath caught in my throat.

I still didn't know what she was trying to tell me. Her words, however, carried a strange weight that was impossible to ignore.

Sayu must have been speaking from a place of real understanding.

"I've been running away, looking for some kind of solace...", she went on. "I thought that if my environment changed and the people I interact with changed...I would feel a little better. And I thought I did."

She was speaking flatly, her voice calm.

"But I finally realized, it wasn't the people or the place... The thing that needed to change was me."

She paused and shifted her gaze my way.

"That was thanks to you and the people around you."

"...I see."

Her words were so direct that I wasn't sure how to feel. I looked away.

My conversation with Sayu that day was gradually making me realize something.

She must...already have all the answers she needed in order to take that first step. They were already inside her.

All she needed now was the courage to go home and face her mother and, in turn, her past.

“Okay, we’re halfway there!”

“Have we walked that far already? This place is closer than I thought.”

“Talking makes the time go faster. Okay, now we have to climb this hill,” Sayu said, pointing to the start of a gentle slope. The path clearly led to the top.

“...Don’t tell me the rest of the walk is uphill?”

“It sure is.”

“Hey, hold on... You can’t just make an old man like me do this kinda exercise.”

Sayu snickered.

As I watched her, I found myself thinking about how in only a few days, I’d be saying good-bye to that smile forever.

It was a painful thought, but I tried hard not to let it get to me.

*

“Haaah! We made it.”

“That was harder than I expected...”

By the time we reached the top of the hill, my body had heated up so much, it was covered in a thin layer of sweat despite the cold night air.

“Are you telling me two high school girls rode up here on a bike?”

“I was thinking the same thing... Maybe it was an e-bike and I just didn’t realize.”

We chatted as we made our way to the grassy area of the park at the top of the hill.

“Over here, Mr. Yoshida.”

Sayu plopped herself down in the center of the grass and lay back.

“Wah! The ground’s so cold!”

“Hey now, won’t our clothes get dirty?” I asked.

“It’s fine. I’m the one who washes them anyway. Come on, Mr. Yoshida, hurry up!”

I sat down on the grass and lay back as Sayu instructed.

A starry sky instantly stretched out in front of me.

“Whoa...,” I said despite myself.

The stars were more beautiful than I ever could have imagined.

“They’re gorgeous, right?” Sayu asked from beside me with a hint of pride.

“Yeah...”

It’d been a long time since I had last seen the stars shining so bright.

“Hey, Mr. Yoshida,” Sayu said, rolling onto her side.

The world around us was silent, so even though she was speaking quietly, I had no problem hearing her.

“When I came here before, Asami told me something.”

“About what?”

“She told me that from the perspective of the stars, each of us is insignificant, but we all have histories and futures of our own—”

“Pfft.”

I burst out laughing, and Sayu’s disapproving gaze bore into me from the side.

It wasn’t what Asami had said that I found funny, though.

“There’s no way that girl is a high schooler.”

“Oh yeah... Ha-ha. She is pretty...grown-up.”

“Sorry for interrupting.”

“No, it’s fine.”

Sayu looked back up at the stars and continued.

“When she told me that...I felt so relieved, I started crying.”

“You felt relieved?”

“Yeah... Asami acknowledged the horrible things I went through in the past and told me how impressed she was that I’d carried on living my life.”

Asami was right. Sayu bore the burden of a sorrowful past no one her age could be expected to deal with, and yet, she’d continued to search for a way out. Other people might not approve of the path she’d taken, but she never gave up trying to improve her situation.

“When I think about it now, though...,” Sayu murmured, her voice trembling, “what Asami said was a kind of forgiveness, but it was also a reality check.”

Her words echoed softly as they were absorbed into the starry sky.

I stayed quiet and listened to her.

“No matter how long I live or how many different people come into my life...what I’ve done, and the journey I took to get here, will always stay with me as part of my history.”

“...Yeah, I guess so.”

“Other people might forgive or affirm me, but that doesn’t change the fact that I did what I did. I threw away a lot of important things just because I wanted to run away. And I turned my back on the people who cared about me...”

Without thinking, I turned to the side toward Sayu.

She was speaking so candidly about something that was clearly hard to say.

I was worried she might be upset, but those fears vanished when I looked at her.

The sight of the stars reflected in her eyes was beautiful...but she seemed to emit a powerful radiance that couldn’t be explained by that alone.

“The mistakes I’ve made will never disappear.”

Sayu paused and stared straight at me. The look in her eyes was so mature, it startled me.

“But, Mr. Yoshida,” she said, squeezing my hand in hers. It felt cold.

“...Despite all that, at the end of my awful time on the run...I found you.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

We stared at each other as I waited for her to continue.

“If I hadn’t met you, I never would have acknowledged my mistakes, and I might have ended up somewhere much, much worse.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by *somewhere much, much worse*, but I knew it was probably just as bad as it sounded.

“After I found you, everything got better. I’m so happy, I don’t want to run away anymore.”

“.....”

Her words lingered in my ears.

“I...want to stay here forever,” she said gently, her eyes never straying from mine.

How was I supposed to respond to that?

I opened my mouth to say something, then stopped... This happened a few times before Sayu interrupted me with a little chuckle.

“But, you know...I really shouldn’t.”

“...Huh?” I asked stupidly before I could stop myself.

Sayu looked back up at the stars.

We were still holding hands. At some point, the heat from my palm had transferred to hers, and it now felt warm.

“If I stayed here forever,” she said, “I’d never come to terms with my past. I’d never get any closure...and I’d never stop running away.”

She squeezed my hand tighter.

“My past would be nothing but an escape. And that would mean...”

I could see a tear falling from the corner of her eye.

She was trying to give voice to a feeling that really mattered to her.

All I could do was listen—no, it was my duty to listen.

With tears in her eyes, Sayu looked at me.

“That would mean...that meeting you would have been for nothing.”

These words weighed heavy on my heart.

Sayu was crying as she spoke, but she was also smiling.

“I feel so lucky to have met you, Mr. Yoshida,” she said gently. “No...I don’t just *feel* lucky; I *am* lucky.”

She sat up off the ground and placed her other hand over mine.

Our eyes met again as she peered down at me.

“I’m so lucky to have met you, Mr. Yoshida,” she stated resolutely.

I could feel my chest grow warm.

“Me too,” I almost said, but Sayu continued before I could.

“That’s why...”

I could sense a strength in her eyes, stronger than before.

Sayu sniffled, then carried on.

“...I need to prove it.”

“...Prove it?”

“Yeah, prove it. I need to prove that meeting you was good for me. Convincing myself isn’t enough. I need to prove it in a way that everyone else can see. And then... And then...”

Sayu explained all this in a rush, then took a deep breath.

A smile suddenly came to her face, and she continued in a singsong voice.

“...I think I’ll be able to survive on my own.”

Her expression as she said this didn’t look like that of a high schooler.

The Sayu before me...looked like a full-grown woman.



...Oh, right.

I took a deep breath, then let it out again.

I felt a strange sense of euphoria in my heart, followed by a calm that seemed to contradict it.

After hearing her words and seeing the look on her face...I understood.

Sayu was going to be all right.

She had built up the strength to take the next step on her own.

"...All right." I nodded, pretending not to notice the nasal tinge to my voice. "So how are you going to prove it in a way that everyone else can see?"

Sayu chuckled as she looked at me.

"You already know the answer to that," she said, squeezing my hand. "I'm going to go home and make peace with my past...and grow up."

I felt my chest tighten once again.

Her words meant, in no uncertain terms, that she was "ready."

It had finally come from her own mouth, of her own volition.

I felt my body tremble.

"I've been thinking about what I can take home with me from my time on the run."

Sayu kept her eyes fixed on mine as she said this.

"I finally met someone I felt truly comfortable with, and yet, I was scared that I'd have nothing left to show for it when we separated. But..."

Sayu clasped my right hand tightly in both of hers.

Our eyes stayed fixed on each other.

Sayu flashed me her carefree grin and said:

"I found you."

She was repeating herself.

But I knew exactly why she'd felt the need to say it again.

"Yeah..."

I felt something warm rising in my chest, and I desperately pushed it back down.

"That's all I need to bring home with me. The fact that I found you is enough," she concluded.

Then she took a deep breath and lay back down beside me.

“So...promise you’ll be rooting for me,” she said in the tiniest of voices.

“...Of course I will,” I said, my voice just as small. Sayu chuckled again, then fell silent.

For a long time, the two of us simply lay there together, gazing up at the night sky.

Eventually, the stars became a blur, and I could no longer see them clearly.

I felt my eyes grow hot.

Sayu was going back to Hokkaido in two days.

Chapter 12 Best Friend

“Oh, crap. My phone died.”

When I took my smartphone out of my pocket during lunch break, I found it had no charge. It was only then that I realized I’d forgotten to plug it in the night before.

“Uh-oh,” said Mishima. “Though you don’t use it that often anyway, right?”

“Yeah...I guess not,” I replied vaguely.

Just as Mishima said, I used my phone only to tell Sayu when I was working overtime or eating out with a coworker and would be coming home late. That said, with her big day fast approaching, not being able to contact her made me a little uneasy.

“Didn’t you bring your charger?”

“I left it plugged in above my bed.”

“Oh no... And my phone’s a different model, so I can’t help you,” Mishima said.

That reminded me—didn’t Hashimoto have a similar phone?

“Say, Hashimoto...”

“Yeah, my charger will probably work. I brought it, so I’ll lend it to you later.”

“Thanks. As long as I can charge it at some point during the day, I’ll be fine.”

“No problem,” Hashimoto replied, slurping down his miso soup from the work cafeteria.

“Tomorrow’s the day, right?” he added, looking over at me like he’d just remembered.

“What day?”

“The day Sayu goes home.”

“Oh, yeah...”

Hashimoto rarely brought up Sayu. *I guess even he’s worried about her*, I thought.

“You’re right. It’s tomorrow.”

“Already, huh? ...It’ll be lonely without her.”

“You’ve never even met her!”

“I mean for you, Yoshida,” he clapped back. I didn’t have anything to say to that.

“I...”

“You’re suddenly going to lose the person who welcomes you home every day and prepares your meals and baths. I’m sure you’ll miss her.”

His words were like salt in my wounds, and I fell silent.

“Once Sayu goes home, you’ll have to do all the housework yourself. It won’t just be sad—it’ll also be stressful,” Mishima said, jumping in. She was smirking, seizing the opportunity to tease me.

Usually, I would have shouted something back. But for some reason, I couldn’t work up the strength that day.

“Yeah, you’re right...,” I replied listlessly. The two of them looked at each other, sharing a wry smile.

“Well, be sure to head straight home after work and make the most of the time you guys have left.”

“Make the most of it, huh...,” I repeated.

This was the last day we’d spend living together.

How could I wrap up our final day in a way that’d send Sayu home on a positive note?

I thought this over as I finished lunch, and before I knew it, it was time to go back to work.

I had a lot to get done that day. If I didn’t concentrate and finish, I wouldn’t be able to leave on time.

I went straight back to my desk and got started right away.

*

It was getting toward time to leave, and I'd managed to complete almost all of my tasks for the day.

As my concentration began to slip, I suddenly remembered my smartphone. *Oh yeah—it's out of juice.*

"Do you mind if I borrow that charger, Hashimoto?"

"Oh, that's right..."

He'd apparently forgotten all about my request. He quickly fished the charger out of his desk drawer and handed it to me.

"Thanks."

"Be sure to put it back in here when you're done with it."

He knocked on the drawer he'd pulled it from, and I nodded. Unless the whole department was drowning, Hashimoto always left on time, so I'd be in trouble if I didn't find out in advance where to put it back.

I plugged the charger into the wall and connected my phone. After a short wait, its pitch-black screen lit up with a large image of a charging battery. All I had to do now was wait a few minutes, and the phone would start up on its own.

I put it down for a bit and focused my attention back on my remaining work.

Just as I finished, the phone vibrated to signal that it was switching back on.

I didn't think anyone would have contacted me, but I tapped the screen to check my notifications anyway.

Much to my surprise, I had three.

The first was a missed call. It was from Sayu's number. I was curious why she would call me, but she hadn't left a message, so it probably wasn't urgent. But in that case, wouldn't a text have sufficed?

Finding this suspicious, I went to check my other notifications. The next was a message from Asami.

As I read the contents, I broke out in a cold sweat.

Hey, Yoshi. Did Sayu go out someplace today? I rang the doorbell, like, a million times, but there was no answer.

She'd sent another message a few minutes later.

Uh, the door's unlocked and Sayu's not here. What's going on? She isn't reading my messages. Do you know anything?

I reflexively shot up from my desk. I could feel my coworkers staring at me from their seats nearby.

Crap! I thought as I sat back down. My breath grew shallow, and I couldn't stop sweating.

"What's up?"

Hashimoto, who was sitting beside me, shot me a questioning look.

"It sounds like Sayu's gone missing. She called me an hour ago, but there's been no word from her since." My voice was trembling. "Her friend messaged me to say she wasn't at home."

"...Is she gonna be okay? She's not in danger, is she? Like that time before, when you had to leave early...?"

"I don't know. I just need to get in touch with her."

I was frantically tapping away at my phone's screen when Hashimoto suddenly grabbed hold of my arm to stop me.

"What?"

"You should do that on your way home. Pack up and leave."

"Huh? But work's not over—" I began to protest, but Hashimoto interrupted me with the harshest tone I'd ever heard him use.

"What the hell are you talking about? Who gives a crap about work?! You need to think more about what really matters to you, Yoshida. I'm sure you already know what that is."

Having spoken his mind, Hashimoto got up from his desk and hurried off to where Ms. Gotou was seated.

Then, loud enough for me to hear, he said:

"I'm feeling a little under the weather, so I'm going to head out early. Yoshida's feeling awful, too, so I'll see him home."

Ms. Gotou sat there for a few seconds, baffled by this bald-faced lie. Then, after a glance or two my way, she appeared to work out what was going on.

"Fine. I'll let the higher-ups know you're leaving. But...it'll be your responsibility if there are any problems."

“Great. We appreciate it.”

Our excuse was an obvious lie, which probably wouldn’t go over well with the bosses. I figured that’s what Ms. Gotou meant when she said we’d be responsible.

I was still seated, shocked by Hashimoto’s uncharacteristically decisive action, when he made his way back.

“Come on, Yoshida! Let’s go.”

“O-okay...”

“See you all tomorrow!” Hashimoto called out, his voice way too loud for someone who was supposed to be sick. Our confused coworkers all said, “Bye...,” and I followed suit, then hurried out of the office.

Once I was in Hashimoto’s car with my seat belt buckled, he hurriedly asked, “You’re still living in the same place, right, Yoshida?”

“Yeah... Come to think of it, you’ve driven there before, haven’t you?” I recalled that he and his wife had come over once some time ago. “I haven’t moved.”

“Got it. I more or less remember where it is, but you’ll have to help me once we’re off the main road.” He spoke quickly, then started the engine.

I spent a few minutes trying to think of what to say to him as he drove, but in the end, I settled for a simple “thanks.”

He didn’t answer.

We spent a few more minutes in silence before he finally spoke up.

“You’re pissing me off.”

“Huh?”

His aggressive choice of words caught me off guard—I rarely heard him speak that way. He kept his eyes on the road as he continued.

“To be honest, ever since you picked up that high schooler, I had a feeling things would turn out like this.”

“What do you mean, *like this*?”

“All you think about is her.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is. The fact that you don’t realize it makes it even worse. You’re not in grade school...”

Hashimoto took a sharp right turn. I lost my balance and almost hit my head on the passenger-side window.

“The only thing on your mind these days is Sayu,” he grumbled. “That’s not necessarily bad. From what I’ve heard, you take really good care of her. The law wouldn’t look too kindly on it, but from a humanitarian perspective, what you’re doing isn’t wrong... I’m saying that as your friend.”

“So what—” I was trying to say, “So what are you so pissed off about?” But just then, Hashimoto took another sharp turn at an intersection. I heard a *thunk*, and the car shook. This time, I really did knock my head on the window.

“Can’t you drive a little more carefully?”

“We’re in a rush,” Hashimoto replied without an ounce of remorse. He must have done it on purpose.

“It’s been obvious for a long time what’s important to you. You should have realized what it is by now. And yet, here you are, desperately trying to turn a blind eye right up until the very last second. *That’s* what pisses me off.”

He wasn’t even attempting to hide his rage. This was so unlike his usual calm demeanor. Even when he griped about work, he always had a carefree smile on his face.

Now, however, Hashimoto was clearly angry. It was the first time in years of friendship that I’d seen him like this.

“And you were just gonna sit at work at a time like this? I could tell from the look on your face that you wanted nothing more than to run out that door,” he spat, casting a quick sideways glance at me. “If you don’t hurry up and figure out what matters to you, it’s going to slip through your fingers.” With that, Hashimoto turned back to watch the road ahead.

His words echoed in my mind.

If you don’t hurry up and figure out what matters to you, it’s going to slip through your fingers.

I got the feeling that was exactly what I needed to hear right now.

“You’re worried about sending Sayu home by herself, aren’t you?”

I couldn't bring myself to answer straightaway. I knew he was right, though.

"But there's more to it than that," he continued. "That might be part of it, but it's not everything."

He paused there.

Just then, the traffic light turned red. The car came to a stop, and Hashimoto sent me a piercing stare.

"You don't want to be separated from her."

It felt like he was grabbing my insides with his bare hands. My chest ached.

"That's not true... As long as she's happy, that's all that matters."

"And you think she'll be happy? Going home like this?"

Bull's-eye.

That was exactly what I was worried about.

I knew that Sayu had to go home. Circumstances demanded it.

But that would solve only her mother's problems—not hers.

After all that running away, Sayu had finally begun to smile like she meant it. I feared that smile would be wiped off her face all over again when she went back to her family.

"It's written on your face," Hashimoto said, startling me. "You're my best friend... I can tell."

The light turned green, and he stepped on the gas pedal.

We both fell silent again.

I thought back on the doubts that had been troubling me before.

What would be best for Sayu? And where had she gone?

I didn't think she was in any sort of danger. She'd gone missing several times before, and it had always been of her own volition. Considering the timing, it seemed safe to assume that was the case now, too.

"Do you have any idea where she might be?" Hashimoto asked me abruptly.

"No... Well, I do have some ideas, but we'd just be going around to every place I can think of," I replied, and Hashimoto laughed.

"Sounds like you have your work cut out for you."

Hashimoto pressed the gas pedal a little harder.

That was when I realized we were only one station away from my stop.

“Driving sure is faster than taking the train, huh?” I remarked.

“The train takes a pretty roundabout route to your stop. Should we start by heading over to your place?”

“Yeah, that’d be great.”

“We can use the car to look for her, too. It’ll be quicker.”

“...Thanks.”

“Save the thanks for when we find her,” he said before lowering his tone.

“Yoshida...if something really matters to you, don’t let anything distract you from it. You two need each other. If you’re worried, why don’t you go with her?”

“Go with her? All the way to Hokkaido?”

“Yeah.”

“You think so, too, huh...” I shook my head, and Hashimoto laughed at me.

“What? Did Mishima tell you the same thing?”

“How’d you know it was Mishima...?”

“It just seems like something she’d say.”

Hashimoto knew his stuff. Maybe he’d already caught on to Mishima’s personality—her work habits included.

“We’ll manage at the office. I mean, we’re only working to get paid anyway. Even if things go south, who cares?”

“Come on, that’s way too irresponsible. I’m playing a crucial role in these projects now,” I replied. Hashimoto shot me a sidelong glance.

“You’re playing a crucial role with Sayu, too,” he remarked harshly. “You put yourself in that position, and now she needs you. Wouldn’t it be equally irresponsible to just wave her off with an ‘okay, see ya, good luck in Hokkaido’?”

“...That’s—”

“It’s the same thing. There’s no difference. All that’s left is for you to decide which one matters more.”

He breathed a small sigh.

“...Why do I have to lecture you like you’re a kid?”

“...Sorry.”

But his lecture had helped me realize how I felt. Even I wasn't that thick.

As I sat in silence, Hashimoto said again, "Work will be fine. You've left us some pretty good guidelines. Endou and I will take care of the more demanding work, and Mishima can handle any new tasks that come in. We'll manage."

"I suppose so..."

"I won't say any more. The rest is up to you."

Hashimoto reverted to his usual calm tone after that.

"I take a left turn here, right?"

At his question, my attention shifted to the car window. The area outside looked familiar. We were at my local station.

"Yeah, it's a left turn here."

"I'm surprised how well I remember the way."

Hashimoto sniffed proudly and quickly made his way to my apartment.

We soon arrived outside. I told him to wait for a minute, then bolted up the stairs to my apartment.

I tried the front door, but it was locked. When I unlocked it and pushed it open, I found Asami sitting in the living room.

"I didn't realize you were here," I said.

"I couldn't just leave the place unlocked, could I?"

"I appreciate that."

"I take it you haven't found Sayu..." She sighed, shaking her head. "I've looked everywhere I could think of. I stopped by work—even checked our secret spots. There was no sign of her."

"This might be a long shot, but what about Yaguchi?"

"He's still on his shift. If you want to talk to him, you'll have to go to the convenience store."

"Nah. If he's working, it's not him. He's just the only person I could think of who might try to kidnap her."

"Wow, you don't trust him at all. I guess he *does* have a prior."

Asami seemed calm, considering how panicked her message had sounded.

"You seem pretty chill."

"Freaking out won't help anything."

“I guess not, but... You’re not hiding her from me, are you?”

“Why would I do that? That wouldn’t do her any good.”

I looked Asami straight in the eye—it didn’t seem like she was lying.

“I’m going to check a few other places I thought of... Sorry to ask, but
—”

“It’s fine. I’d just be sitting around worrying if I went home anyway. I’ll wait here.”

Asami, perceptive as usual, guessed what I was going to ask before the words even left my mouth. I wanted someone to stay at home in case Sayu returned while I was gone.

“Okay. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Roger that. I hope you find her,” Asami said, giving me a little wave.

I rushed out the front door and headed back to Hashimoto.

... *Where are you, Sayu?*

I gritted my teeth as I climbed into his car, then told him all the places I could think of.

I had to track her down, no matter what it took.

Just then, my phone began to ring.

Chapter 13 Sharing

“What are those two up to?”

The company president, apparently having wrapped up his conversation with a nearby executive, was slowly making his way to my desk.

I had an idea of why Hashimoto and Yoshida might have left, but it wasn't something I could tell the president. I tilted my head to the side in a show of confusion.

“Good question... Well, it was clearly something urgent. They didn't look sick at all.”

“They sure didn't,” he responded in his usual carefree tone, bobbing his head. He didn't seem angry, but he rarely showed his emotions. I had no idea how what just happened had affected his opinion of the two of them.

“They're usually such hard workers, so they must have been in a real fix. I'll be sure to talk to them about it lat—”

The president raised a hand and stopped me there.

“Oh no... No need for that. It's fine,” he said, his tone still casual. “I know how incredibly skilled they are. I'd hate to give them a hard time and wind up losing them. If there's something in their lives more important than work, then we've got to let them take care of it. We still have a lot of work for them to do in the future.”

“...That's true.”

I nodded, and a smile came to my face.

This man was probably the reason a company like ours, with relatively young employees, had been able to grow so big. Whenever I told people outside the company that I was a senior managing director, they were often surprised that a woman my age could even hold such a title.

“All right, I’m going to head out in a bit. Make sure you do, too, Ms. Gotou.”

“I will. Thank you, sir.”

After we said our good-byes, the boss made his way back to his office. I watched him until he was out of sight, then started getting ready to leave.

To make Yoshida so distressed right at the end of the workday, something must have happened with Sayu. Depending on the situation, I might be able to help, so I made up my mind to contact him once I left the office.

“Good work, everyone!”

A few minutes after the hour, I said good-bye to my colleagues and headed out the door.

I checked my phone in case Yoshida had sent me a message, but he hadn’t.

I hoped that meant he’d solved the problem, but if he hadn’t, there might still be a chance for me to help.

I figured getting in touch with him would be a good start, so once I’d left the building, I took out my phone to call him.

But just then, I caught sight of something unexpected.

A familiar girl was standing in front of the building’s entrance.

It was Sayu, wearing her school uniform.

“Oh, Ms. Gotou...”

“Sayu?”

I looked at my phone, then back at Sayu. I decided to put my phone back in my bag for the time being and walked over to her.

“What are you doing here?”

“Uhhh... Is Mr. Yoshida still at work?”

“...I guess you didn’t see him, then. It’s just like I thought.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked even more confused than I was.

“Did you tell Yoshida you were coming here?”

“I tried to call him during his lunch break, but he didn’t answer... I figured I could see him if I went to his office, so I came all the way here without a second thought. But...my phone battery died while I was on the train.”

This was enough to give me the gist of what had happened. I sighed.

“First, let me give Yoshida a call,” I said. “He left work more than an hour ago looking really upset. He was probably panicking because he couldn’t reach you.”

“Huh?!” Sayu yelped, and a small chuckle escaped my lips.

“Wait here just a moment.”

I took a few steps away and called Yoshida.

“Hello, this is Yoshida. I’m so sorry about earli—”

“Yoshida, I found Sayu.”

“Huh?!”

I instinctively pulled the phone away from my ear. It was kind of amusing how the two of them expressed their surprise in exactly the same way.

“In front of the office building. You must have just missed each other.”

“What in the world is she doing there...?”

I was a little curious about that myself.

“Anyway, I don’t want to make her wait here, so I’ll take her back to my place for a bit. It’s too chilly to stand around outside.”

“Okay, that’s fine. Sorry for the trouble... Wait, what?! Did you say... you’re taking her back to your place?!”

I held the phone away from my ear once again. I could hear Hashimoto laughing on the other end. It sounded like they were still together.

“I live near the office. I’ll send you my address later, so come and pick her up from there.”

“O-oh... Okay, thank you very much.”

I couldn’t help but smile at how stupefied he sounded. He must have been so relieved.

“Besides, I bet you didn’t even change clothes before you went out looking for her. You should make a stop at your apartment, take a breather, put on something comfy, and then come and get her.”

“...You’re right. Thanks for being so thoughtful.”

“See you later.”

I hung up, then turned back to Sayu.

“Okay, then. Let’s go back to my place and wait for Yoshida to come collect you.”

“Huh? I don’t want to cause any trouble—”

“You both say the exact same things,” I interrupted, unable to stifle a laugh. “It’s fine. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

I squeezed her hand to reassure her, and an indescribable expression crossed her face. She gave a single nod.

*

“What? You’re going back to Hokkaido tomorrow?” said Ms. Gotou.

I’d gone to meet Mr. Yoshida at his office but somehow managed to miss him on the way. Then I ran into Ms. Gotou, and before I knew it, she’d invited me over to her place.

Once there, she’d asked me a vague question about how things were going with Mr. Yoshida. Since we were on good enough terms to have swapped contact information, I felt obliged to tell her about my return home and explained my current situation.

“...That’s the plan. Considering the timing, it’s no wonder Mr. Yoshida panicked when he thought I disappeared...”

“Hey, come on. You can forget about that now. Well...it wouldn’t hurt to apologize to him. He was pretty stressed out.”

Her gentle suggestion made me feel even worse.

I should know better than anyone that there are people who worry about me when they can’t get in touch—it’s happened countless times before. And yet, that day of all days, I’d thoughtlessly left the apartment with no means of communication. I was ashamed of myself.

“Here you go. Some hot milk,” Ms. Gotou said, placing a mug in front of me.

Holding her own cup of instant coffee, she sat down on the carpet near my seat on the couch.

“Oh, please, you can take the sofa,” I said. “I’ll sit on the floor...”

“I’d never have a guest sit on the floor. It’s fine. You can stay put.”

As if in direct protest to my comment, she sat with her thighs flat against the carpet.

“...This sofa is so soft,” I remarked.

“Riiight? On my days off, you can hardly pry me away from it,” she replied with an amused giggle. “You came all this way, so make yourself comfy.”

“Thank you.”

I felt a little more at ease after her comment. Once I took a sip of the hot milk, my body began to warm up from the inside, relaxing me even further.

“Yoshida’s gonna miss you,” said Ms. Gotou.

“Huh?” I answered, my voice a little high-pitched. Ms. Gotou snorted with laughter.

“I mean, when you go back home. He’ll be living alone again.”

Her words filled me with a strange, indefinable feeling, and I turned away.

“He’ll...miss me, huh?”

“Of course he will. The kid he spent every day with is leaving!”

She made it sound obvious, but I wasn’t so sure.

“...I thought it’d make things simpler for him if I was gone,” I said cautiously.

Ms. Gotou’s face took on a mischievous expression, and she cocked her head to one side.

“...Do you really believe that?”

I could feel her gaze piercing me.

“If you really believe that after seeing how Yoshida’s been acting all this time, I’m a little surprised. On the other hand, if you’re lying to me, I might start questioning your character.”

In a way, Ms. Gotou was giving me advice, but at the same time, I could tell she was trying as hard as she could not to sound like she was criticizing me.

I knew deep down that I was no match for her.

“I...don’t *really* believe that. I wouldn’t be surprised if Yoshida misses me. But...”

I wasn’t entirely confident he would.

“I do feel a little...anxious.”

“About what?”

“The thought that Mr. Yoshida might completely forget about me once I’m gone...makes me a little anxious. And sad.”

Ms. Gotou blinked a few times, then burst out laughing.

“Wh-what’s so funny?”

“I’m sorry—I wasn’t laughing at you.” Ms. Gotou tried desperately to stifle her laughter and shook her head. “I just thought you were really cute.”

“You’re lying.”

“Am not!” The corners of her mouth turned up in a smirk, and she nodded a few times. “You’re only worried about baseless fears like that because you’re so young.”

“I don’t think that’s true at all.”

“It totally is. Oh, I miss being that young!”

“Please stop making fun of me!” I protested, raising my voice slightly. But this only made Ms. Gotou laugh even more.

Once she stopped, the two of us sat in silence for a few minutes.

The bitter aroma of instant coffee filled the room.

“...So did you learn anything?” Ms. Gotou asked out of the blue.

“...What do you mean?” I replied.

She smiled gently and clarified. “Did you learn anything since you ran away from home?”

“Let me think...”

I thought back over everything that had happened, one by one.

“I learned that getting a home-cooked meal every day is pretty great.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And that having a place to sleep is a wonderful thing.”

“Heh-heh... Yeah.”

“And...that being a high school girl has this whole image attached to it.”

“...Right.”

“And...”

I noticed that my voice sounded more nasal. I could sense myself tearing up, and I fought desperately to keep my emotions in check.

“I learned the world is full of horrible grown-ups... But... But...”

Despite my best efforts, I couldn’t stop myself from crying.

“...there are...really kind ones, too,” I said through tears.

Ms. Gotou got up off the floor and came to sit next to me on the sofa.

She grabbed hold of my hand and said in a gentle voice, “You’ve learned a lot.”

“...Yes.” I sniffled, nodding.

Ms. Gotou grabbed a box of tissues from the table in front of us and passed it to me without saying a word.

“Thank you.”

“No problem,” she replied with a kind smile on her face. She silently sipped her coffee while I blew my nose.

“I’ve done it, too,” she murmured. “Run away from home, that is.”

There was a far-off look in her eyes. As I watched her from the side, I was reminded of how beautiful she was.

“I was just like you, Sayu. When I was in high school, I ran away for a long time.”

“Did you...have problems with your family?” I asked, and she quietly shook her head.

“No, things were fine. I didn’t really have a proper reason to do it. It was just typical teenage confusion... I was thinking about what it means to be myself in the world.”

For some reason, I found myself deeply empathizing with what she said. The same kind of thing had spun around in my head when I first left home, too.

“I felt like such a boring person, and I wanted to do something that would make me different. So I took a weird leap of faith and left home.”

She had a soft look on her face, like she was flicking through a photo album of her memories. She spoke leisurely, focusing on a single point in the distance. She must have been replaying the scenes of her youth in her mind’s eye.

“...It’s a pretty long story, but do you mind if I share it with you?” Ms. Gotou asked, looking up at me.

“...Of course. Go ahead.”

I’d told Ms. Gotou more than enough about myself, after all. It was time we swapped roles. Plus, I was genuinely interested in her past.

I clutched my mug of milk with both hands and got ready to listen to her story.



Chapter 14

High Schooler

Chapter 14 High Schooler

When I was in high school, I was a happy-go-lucky kid with no direction and a totally unrealistic view of the world.

I'm still plagued by that lack of direction to a certain extent, but when I look back at my old self from a more mature perspective, it's obvious that I had absolutely no opinions of my own.

I found it easier to go along with what other people decided and hated thinking about anything too deeply.

My nature earned me average grades, and while I joined the literature club—a cultural group that didn't require any particular practice or effort—I basically never participated.

Until my second year of high school, I had no doubts about myself and was more or less content. Actually, I don't think it even occurred to me to question whether I was content.

It wasn't until the summer of that year that I began to have second thoughts.

There was a boy I got on particularly well with—you might say we were on the same wavelength. Unlike me, he was the type to say exactly what was on his mind, and although he was a bit of a class loner, I enjoyed talking with him.

Our conversations were full of humor, and I enjoyed them immensely—even if all I did was nod along.

Thinking back on it now, it's surprising that our relationship never turned romantic, considering how much time we spent together. After meeting as freshmen, we maintained a friendship that was neither super close nor especially distant.

Then, in the summer of our second year, he told me about his plans for the future.

"I'm thinking of studying abroad next year," he told me.

My eyes went wide.

The words *study* and *abroad* spun around inside my head, the reality of what they meant not really sinking in.

"You're going overseas?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking I'll spend a year attending high school, then enroll in college there, too."

"Wow... Cool," I replied. This was the most enthusiastic response I could muster, given the suddenness of his announcement. "That's great. Going abroad sounds nice."

I nodded, and I'll never forget how happy he looked when he answered me back.

"So you'll root for me?!"

This was the first time during one of our conversations that I didn't feel like agreeing.

I think we were able to get along so well because his strong initiative compensated for my total lack of one.

Even if I didn't bring up any topics of my own, he was still happy to talk with me. I enjoyed chatting with him, too—I didn't feel any pressure. Until the topic of studying abroad came up, I'd never put much thought into the differences between us.

As a result, I felt like he was abandoning me out of the blue.

He seemed like a very impressive person. What was I in comparison?

I'd never made a single decision on my own—I'd only ever done what others told me.

I suddenly felt ashamed.

That was when the impulsive urge to run away overcame me.

Looking back, I was a total idiot.

I told my parents I was going to stay with a friend, packed a few changes of clothes I could mix and match and some underwear, and strode out the door.

Such a poorly planned escape was bound to go badly. That first day, I bought and ate snacks whenever I felt hungry and began the arduous task of wandering around the city on foot. At first, I was pretty excited, but—being easily bored and having zero determination—I soon grew accustomed to the unusual situation and began focusing on only the painful parts, such as my tired legs.

By the end of the day, I was completely exhausted and wound up standing around aimlessly, leaning against a sidewalk guardrail amid the hustle and bustle of the city.

Just as I was thinking about whether to go home, someone called out to me.

“Hey, you’re way too cute to be alone.”

It was a pickup line. I was suddenly surrounded by three men who were clearly older than me. I sensed their eyes drifting toward my chest, and it freaked me out.

I ignored them and tried to get away, but one of the three men grabbed my arm. His grip was so strong, I wanted to scream, but I managed to stop myself.

“There’s no need to run away,” he said. “We just want to hang out.”

This crass invitation was like something out of a manga, and it made me even more uncomfortable. But being hemmed in by three brawny men was so frightening that I couldn’t work up the courage to fight back.

I wanted to say no, but I was too scared to speak. However, at that very moment, someone else appeared.

“What are you doing out, Megumi? It’s past your curfew.”

A man in a suit appeared from behind me and patted me on the shoulder. I’d never met him before.

“Your mother’s really mad. You’d better hurry home.”

“O-okay...but...”

Once I realized he was trying to help me, I managed to squeeze out a few words. Then the man in the suit glared at the three guys and said, “Did you

need something from my daughter?”

“O-oh... You’re her dad?”

“Let’s get outta here.”

The three of them were obviously shaken and hurried away.

The man in the suit watched them leave, then turned to look at me.

“You’ve got to firmly refuse when you find yourself in a situation like that,” he said. “Take care.”

After that brief piece of advice, he turned to leave. For some reason, though, I found myself calling out to stop him.

“Excuse me!”

He turned back to look at me, a little peeved, and asked what I wanted.

To this day, I still don’t know where I found the courage to do what I did.

But at that moment, I managed to face him and say:

“I...don’t have a home to go back to.”

*

Although he’d looked visibly annoyed at first, his reply came easier than I’d expected.

“Well, I guess you can come to my place for now.”

When I asked him for his name, he only told me his surname—Suzuki.

Mr. Suzuki was the head teacher at a cram school well-known among local students. He had a wife and a child in the second grade.

When I first turned up at Mr. Suzuki’s house, his wife was incredibly surprised, and they ended up having a small argument. Eventually, Mr. Suzuki was able to convince his wife by saying I’d stay only until things had blown over at home.

Thinking back on it now, Mr. Suzuki was taking a huge risk. At the time, however, I didn’t give it much thought. I was just happy that such a nice person had taken me in.

I spent about a month at their house without a care in the world.

Mr. Suzuki’s wife was a lovely woman, and I really enjoyed helping her cook and do the housework. Even their son was quite fond of me, and we played and took baths together.

I was an only child, and both of my parents had busy jobs, so these were new experiences for me. I felt very fulfilled that first month.

There was just one problem. I foolishly managed to fall in love with Mr. Suzuki.

I don't remember what triggered it. Perhaps I only felt that way because I'd first met him under such extraordinary circumstances.

He was very handsome, had a great sense of humor, and was extremely kind. His wife told me his conduct was flawless, and he was quite popular among his students as well.

Over the course of the month I spent living with him, my feelings steadily grew.

But he was married. He even had a son. I knew how well Mr. Suzuki and his wife got along, and I would sometimes wake up in the night and hear them doing what couples do.

My feelings for Mr. Suzuki grew stronger, but I cared too deeply for both him and his wife to admit my feelings. As hard as it was, I tried my best to keep the intense emotions of my first love bottled up inside.

And then, a month into my stay, our situation drastically changed.

One night, I woke up, left the room they had lent me, and headed for the washroom. That was when I overheard Mr. Suzuki and his wife talking in the living room next door.

"Strange rumors are going around. I don't think we can keep this up forever."

"I know, but we can't just throw her out on the street."

"We need to talk to her soon and find a way to convince her to go home...before it ruins our lives. They've already asked the police to look for her."

Upon hearing this, I went back to my room in a panic.

I opened the laptop the couple had lent me for entertainment, typed my name and "missing person" into the search bar, and there it was—a missing person request with a picture of my face on it.

I was suddenly terrified.

What if the strange rumors they'd mentioned were about Mr. Suzuki luring a high school girl into his home? Once I started thinking, my

imagination shot off in all sorts of bad directions.

I'd only run away from home because I wanted to experience something out of the ordinary, and I was embarrassed to find myself utterly content with the peace and tranquility I'd found staying with Mr. Suzuki.

It occurred to me that, if I stayed there any longer, I could ruin the lives of Mr. Suzuki and his family. Early the next morning, I left a note in my room and went home.

*

"When I arrived, my parents were furious. No one has ever been as angry with me before or since," Ms. Gotou said with an amused smile. "I told them that a nice lady I'd met while I was out let me stay with her for a month, but they didn't buy it... It took a long time to convince them... Well, they were right that I was lying. I still don't know if they ever actually believed me."

She paused and breathed a heavy sigh before continuing.

"...So yeah. I wasn't away from home for as long as you've been, Sayu, but I did do the same thing when I was in high school."

She turned to the side and watched me closely.

"In the end, my romantic feelings didn't lead anywhere, and I didn't gain a new sense of independence, either... I just learned how useless I was, then went back home."

Her eyes took on an unmistakably gloomy tinge, and I felt my chest constrict.

"You never get what you want. You just have to do what you can to survive. That's what I learned."

"I...had no idea," I said solemnly.

Ms. Gotou then broke the somber mood with a cheery interjection.

"Well, I say that, but I do think I grew up a little after coming back. I certainly became a lot more sensible." She smiled and took a sip of her coffee. "But...at the same time, I became a real coward and lost any backbone I once had."

Again, Ms. Gotou seemed to be looking somewhere far away.

While I was puzzling over whether to respond, she abruptly looked up at me, and we locked eyes.

“I’m sure you’ll have some realizations when you get home, too. You’ve been on a big adventure for a high school girl. Something...will have changed. I know it,” she said, her eyes boring into mine.

“That’s what it means to be a high schooler. It’s a special time—for better...and for worse.” She gripped my hand in hers. “After my experience running away...I always felt like being a high schooler was a nuisance. I just wanted to grow up already...”

Her words resonated with me.

My status as a “high schooler” seemed to rule my whole life. I didn’t fit in with those sparkling popular kids, and I’d lost the first friend I’d ever had. I benefited from the title when I was on the run...but it was also the reason I couldn’t survive on my own.

As I thought about this, Ms. Gotou squeezed my hand tighter, and my focus shifted back to her.

“But there’s no avoiding the fact that it’s a very important time in your life,” she explained slowly, keeping her eyes glued to mine. Her gaze was intense—like she was imparting a truly valuable piece of wisdom.

“You’ll be okay. You’ve got people in your corner.”

Her words slowly sank in.

I *did* have people in my corner.

“Bracing yourself for it might feel scary...but you need to go home.”

With our eyes still locked, I could feel the passion in her voice steadily building, and my heart began to beat faster.

“You have to go back...to being a high schooler again.”

Before I knew it, tears were pouring out of my eyes. At first, I didn’t know why I was crying.

It wasn’t like I was sad.

They must have been tears of happiness.

“I...” I felt tears run down my cheeks. “I’m still a real high schooler, right?”

“You are.”

“It’s okay for me to be one...?”

“Yes, it is.”

Ms. Gotou gently embraced me.

Before I knew what was happening, I was sobbing out loud.

*

“Oh, I didn’t expect you to show up this soon,” said Ms. Gotou.

“I was in a hurry,” I replied.

“Well, I was the one who floored it all the way here...,” Hashimoto added.

When we’d arrived at Ms. Gotou’s place, she and Sayu both came to greet us. Ms. Gotou was dressed in loungewear and Sayu in her uniform.

My relief upon seeing Sayu was soon followed by a wave of anger.

“What the hell did you think you were doing, going to my office of all plac—?!”

“She said she wanted to see where you worked and thought you might as well go home together,” Ms. Gotou declared, interrupting me.

“Huh?”

“I said she wanted to go home with you.”

“Sayu did? With me?”

Sayu, standing next to Ms. Gotou, nodded once as her face turned a faint shade of red. Then she hung her head.

“I’m sorry you couldn’t get in touch with me. My phone died.”

“...Oh, right... Well, it doesn’t matter...”

I suddenly felt completely deflated. Despite the fact that Ms. Gotou was standing right there watching, I collapsed into a squat on the ground. Hashimoto cackled next to me.

“So you’re Sayu, huh? Yoshida’s told me a lot about you,” he announced.

Sayu greeted him. “I’ve heard a lot about you, too.”

“You’re even cuter than he said—”

“Hey! Don’t be weird,” I cut in.

“I wasn’t,” he quipped back, giving me an unexpected slap on the back.

“Anyway, how about you ask her? Now’s as good a time as any,” Hashimoto said. I sighed and looked up.

“Ms. Gotou...”

“Yes?”

I looked her in the eye and steeled myself, then slowly asked my question.

“Can I...take just three days off work?”

She looked confused for a moment, but it wasn't long before her face lit up in realization.

“...Don't tell me you mean the three days from tomorrow,” she said, narrowing her eyes at me.

She'd hit the nail on the head.

“...I know it's short notice, but—”

“Haah...”

Ms. Gotou cut off my explanation with a loud sigh.

At our office, you weren't supposed to request time off the day before or the day of. We had to give notice a month in advance, or at the latest a few weeks before. I knew I was asking for the impossible.

Ms. Gotou looked down at the floor and rubbed her temples with her right hand for a moment.

Then she quickly looked back up with a teasing smile on her face.

“Well, I guess that's doable. I can just say you told me before, but I forgot about it.”

“R-really?!”

“Howwwevvvver!”

Ms. Gotou swiftly brought her face down to mine, startling me.

“You'll be treating me to some delicious barbecue when you get back.”

“Uh...” A strange sound escaped my throat. “O-of course...”

“All right, it's a deal. I'll figure something out. Can I assign Yoshida's tasks to you, then, Hashimoto?” Once I'd agreed, Ms. Gotou moved right along.

“You can, but it'll be a challenge all by myself, so I'll have to get Endou and Koike to help out with odds and ends. Mishima, too.”

“Got it. I don't care how you do it as long as there are no hiccups.” She patted me lightly on the shoulder.

“Well, on that note...” She paused and pushed her face right up to my ear. “Take care of Sayu until she’s back home, Yoshida.”

The way she whispered sent goose bumps all over my body.

But I was overjoyed at her answer.

“...Okay. I’ll do my best,” I said with a nod.

Ms. Gotou grinned and pushed Sayu out the door.

“Well then, they’re here to pick you up, so you’d better head home with Yoshida.”

“...Thank you very much,” Sayu replied with a deep bow. Ms. Gotou gently patted her head.

“Let’s talk again sometime,” she said, her voice full of kindness.

“Okay.” There were tears in Sayu’s eyes as she spoke.

“All right, let’s all go get some rest.”

Hashimoto offered Ms. Gotou a slight bow, and she gave him a friendly wave in return.

I said good-bye as well, and once Sayu had settled into the back of Hashimoto’s car, I climbed into the passenger seat.

As Hashimoto pulled out of the parking lot, I spotted Ms. Gotou waving to us in the rearview mirror.

“Should I drive you all the way back home?” Hashimoto asked.

I nodded. “Yeah... You were a big help today, thanks.”

“No worries. You’ll be treating me to some delicious ramen, right?”

“That goes without saying.”

“With all the toppings.”

“You can order the biggest bowl they have, for all I care!” I said, and we both laughed.

Sayu looked a little uncomfortable in the back seat, but after a few minutes, she closed her eyes and dozed off. She must have been exhausted.

“She really is just an ordinary kid,” Hashimoto said with a sigh.

“...Yeah.” I nodded.

After a few moments of silence, he added, “...Give it your best.”

Hashimoto wasn’t exactly the type to offer words of encouragement, and it felt like he’d made a special effort this time.

I nodded emphatically as a warm feeling filled my heart.

“Will do.”

For the remainder of the trip back, neither of us said a word.

Chapter 15 Promise

“Oh, you found her? What a relief...”

When we arrived home, Asami bolted across the apartment and gave Sayu a big hug.

“Geeeeez, you had me so worried!”

“Sorry...and thanks.”

Leaving the two of them to fuss over each other, I walked briskly into the living room and emptied my wallet and phone out of my pocket.

“Thanks for waiting for us, Asami.”

“Sure. It was no big deal,” she answered with a smirk, giving me a thumbs-up. “Still, if I don’t head home soon, the front gates will lock me out and I won’t be able to get in, so I’d better hurry back!”

Asami then dashed into the living room, scooped her open textbook and assorted possessions off the table and into her shoulder bag, and hustled over to the entryway.

“All right, nighty night! See ya!”

“Wait!”

Asami was heading out the door just like usual when Sayu cried out in an extra-loud voice.

“What’s up?”

Asami looked over at Sayu, her eyes wide with surprise. It kind of felt like she was pulling that face on purpose. She must have known what was going on.

“Um... I’m going home tomorrow... And...”

Sayu squirmed, and her eyes darted around the floor as she decided what to say next.

“Well... I owe you so much... So...I wanted to say thank—”

“Sasa!!”

“Yes?!”

Asami called her name so suddenly and so loudly that it had made Sayu jump.

Asami grinned and gently took hold of her hand.

“We’ll see each other again,” she said, her voice full of calm assurance. “We know how to contact each other, and we both have our whole lives ahead of us... So, you know...”

Asami’s gaze drifted upward, and the corners of her mouth turned into a smirk.

“Save your thanks and all that embarrassing crap...for next time we meet.”

I could sense this was her way of being kind, and I felt my chest grow warm.

Sayu must have felt the same way, because after a few sniffles, she confidently replied, “For sure!”

“Okay, then...”

Sayu and Asami locked eyes and both said:

““See you.””

They had spoken at the exact same time.

*

“I’m turning off the light.”

“Okay.”

Both of us had finished getting ready and settled down for the night. I was sitting on my bed while Sayu sat on her mattress on the floor.

I went to turn off the living room light, then climbed back in bed.

As I tucked myself in, I noticed I felt more restless than usual.

I was painfully aware of why.

This was my last night together with Sayu.

Once she left the next day, she would never come back.

She'd never again be there to wake me up. No breakfast would be ready for me in the morning, and my shirts would no longer be ironed.

I was going to be alone.

It sounded simple when I put it into words, but it still didn't feel real.

Sayu was going home to Hokkaido the very next day.

"Mr. Yoshida." Sayu called out to me from her mattress, returning my thoughts to the present.

"What is it?"

My reply was followed by a few seconds of silence.

"Sayu?" I asked again. I heard the rustle of her turning over in bed.

"...Can I come up there?"

My brain froze at her request.

We'd spent months together in this apartment, and yet, this was the first time Sayu had ever asked me that.

"...I guess you can, but why?"

"Why not? It's our last night together... It's not like you're going to assault me or anything. Right, Mr. Yoshida?"

"Well, no... But..."

My answer was vague—not a clear yes or no—but Sayu climbed up from her mattress and got into bed with me anyway.

"Scoot over a little."

"S-sure..."

She lay down on my left side and let out a deep breath. Now that she was so much closer, I could hear her breathing.

"...We've been living together for so long, but this is the first time I've ever laid down this close to you," Sayu said.

"I guess so," I replied, and she snickered.

"What?"

"Nothing, it just seems weird."

"What does?" I asked, and she turned and met my gaze.

Now that my eyes had adapted to the lack of light, I was able to see just how close her face was to mine.

"I ended up sleeping next to all those other guys within a few days of meeting them, sometimes right away. We got even closer than this—they

were usually right on top of me, actually.”

“Wh-why’re you telling me the gross details all of a sudden? I thought I told you to forget about those guys,” I said, moving toward the wall so I could keep my distance.

Sayu cackled.

“Don’t move away. I won’t do anything creepy. I know you’d throw me out if I tried anything.”

“You got that right. I won’t even wait for you to leave tomorrow.”

“I can’t have that,” she said, giggling again.

Then she rolled over to close the distance I’d put between us. She nuzzled her face into my chest and wrapped her arms around me.

“H-hey...”

“Just for a little while,” she said. “Just let me stay like this for a little while.”

With her body pressed against mine, I could feel her trembling slightly.

“...What’s wrong?” I asked.

Sayu gave me her answer very, very quietly, her face still buried in my chest.

“I’m...really scared.”

“...Oh.”

“I’m scared of leaving a place this kind.”

“...Yeah.”

I was confused at first why she suddenly wanted to get so close—but now, as she lay with her face resting on my chest, I was reminded that she was just a child.

At long last, she’d found a peaceful place to stay. The thought of having to move on confused and frightened her.

“Mr. Yoshida,” she whispered, “if you were my father, I wonder if I would’ve turned out all right.”

Her words were like a vise on my heart.

This was something I’d thought countless times as I listened to Issa and Sayu. *If I had been her guardian, I would’ve taken much better care of her.* I’d thought that over and over.

But...

“But...I’m not your father, Sayu,” I replied, trying to suppress the pain in my heart.

With her face still pressed against my chest, Sayu hugged me a little tighter.

Then she nodded and said, “Yeah, I know.”

I cautiously ran my hand in circles over Sayu’s back and put my arms around her.

Then I gently embraced her.

“I’m just someone who gave you a place to stay for a while. That’s all.”

“Yeah... And it was the kindest and warmest place I ever could have wished for. It was the best.”

“...I’m happy to hear that,” I said, squeezing her a little tighter. “As proprietor of such a high-class establishment, it’s only natural I send you off with a little something extra.”

“...What?”

Sayu squirmed against my chest and looked up at me.

Now facing each other, our eyes met.

“I’m going to come with you to see your mother.”

“...Huh?”

“You’re scared of going alone, right? Then I’ll take care of you, right until the end.”

“Huh? I-is that why you asked for the time off...?”

I nodded.



“Yeah. It was so I could come with you. Didn’t you put two and two together?”

Considering my exchange with Ms. Gotou, it should have been obvious. But Sayu didn’t seem to have it figured out.

After looking away from me and back a few times, she threw her head against my chest once again, this time with the force of a headbutt.

“Ow!”

Sayu drilled her head into me.

It hurt a lot, but I somehow knew she was happy.

Then she abruptly stopped and whispered, “...Thanks, Mr. Yoshida.”

Simply hearing these words gave me a strange sense of contentment.

“...You’re welcome,” I answered sincerely.

Before I knew it, Sayu was snoring, her arms still wrapped around me. Thinking about everything day in and day out must have exhausted her.

I slowly pried her off my chest, turned her onto her back, then put the blanket over her.

Then I put some distance between us and lay down on my back, too.

When we woke up, Sayu would be leaving.

She would have to face her past and think about her future.

When we first met, I’d told her, “*You can live here until we’ve cured that spoiled attitude of yours.*”

I’d do what I could to stay true to my word, right until the very end.

And then, finally...

...our strange life—a high school girl and an old geezer sharing a roof—would come to an end.

Afterword

Nice to meet you. My name is Shimesaba.

I used to spend my time modestly writing stories on the Web. Before I knew it, it was decided that the fourth volume of this story would be published, and I'm starting to think I should stop being shocked as I write these afterwords. I'm still shocked, though.

I wrote about the summer of 2018 at the end of Volume 3, and once again, this volume is being released in the summer. Two years have passed since then.

In the meantime, I moved out of my parents' house and am now renting a two-bedroom apartment.

There are three rooms including the living room, and one of the rooms has just the right placement, so I made it into my computer room, or rather, my office.

I moved in the winter of 2019. It was chilly, but in my area of Japan, the cold wasn't so bad, so I was able to make do by just turning on a fan heater when warm clothes weren't cutting it.

All this meant I was able to move without noticing a certain fact about my new home. I was simply enjoying myself, thinking, *This is so great!* for six whole months.

This "fact," as you've probably guessed, is that...my computer room, once again, has no air-conditioning.

It seems I learned nothing.

Once again, I'm barreling into the summer of 2020 with no AC.

Back at my parents' house, I simply hadn't bought an AC unit. I could have installed it if I had one.

But my current computer room doesn't even have a hole in the wall to run the heat vent through. It has a power plug in the ceiling for an AC unit, though... What were they thinking? Anyway, if I want to install one, I'll have to contact the rental agency and get permission to drill a hole in the wall...so I keep putting it off.

For now, I open the window by my desk at night to alleviate the heat. I bet once the nights start growing muggy, things will get a lot worse.

As I write this, it's still the early-summer rainy season. By the time you're holding this book in your hands, maybe I'll have air-conditioning...

I hope so.

Changing the subject, COVID-19 really flipped the world on its head.

Relatives and celebrities passed away, the economy was paralyzed, favorite shops went out of business...

It seems like the news is always sad, and self-quarantine is suffocating. I feel gloomy, just like everyone else.

But now that we're all getting used to staying at home, I'm starting to see people reconsider how much time they spend working, or finding new hobbies at home, among other positive takes.

You never know how many times in your life society will be upended.

It might happen again and again, or perhaps this will be the last time.

So I hope each of you will think about what you can do right now...what you'd like to do... Have fun, and find a way to spend your time that you feel is worthwhile.

If you're able to find just one thing you treasure, when you look back on this difficult time, you'll have a priceless memory to last a lifetime. Or at least, that's what I think.

I was planning to avoid talking about current affairs in the afterword, but I wanted to record how I feel right now along with my writing, so I've taken the liberty of including it here.

If my words resonate with someone, and they're able to remember them along with this book one day, that would make me very happy.

And now for the acknowledgments.

First, I'd like to thank the two editors who helped me this time around. Editor S and Editor K, thank you very much.

Editor S's smile is lovely but also frightening, both of which helped me keep going. I hope we get the chance to work together again.

Editor K was a constant source of positivity and kindly supported me even when I was mentally on my last legs. Thank you. I look forward to working with you again in the future.

Next, a huge thanks to Imaru Adachi, who was able to provide the cover and interior illustrations on such short notice. I don't know how she was able to find time despite being so busy with the manga, but I'm extremely grateful. I did a little dance of joy when I saw her illustration of Ms. Gotou as a high schooler.

As always, thanks to booota for the character designs. So many people were able to see Yoshida, Sayu, and the rest because you breathed life into them. Whatever happens, I will always see them as the characters you drew...

And a heartfelt thanks to the proofreader, who I'm sure read this book more closely than I did, and to everyone else involved in publishing it. Thank you so much.

Finally, to the readers holding this fourth volume in your hands: My deepest apologies for the long wait. I'll keep doing my best to bring you enjoyable stories, so please keep following Yoshida and Sayu's adventure. We're almost at the finish line.

I'll end the afterword here, wishing that chance will bring my work to you again in the future.

Shimesaba

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink